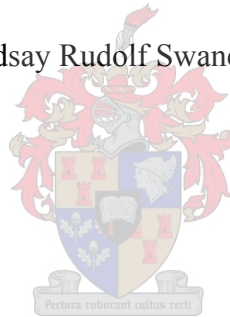


Being in touch

Embodying Christian hospitality in an urban context

by

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own original work, that I am the authorship owner thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

Signature: Lindsay Rudolf Swanepoel

March 2016

Abstract

This study argues that an adequate Christian theology of hospitality understands hospitality as an embodied practice that seeks in proximity and vulnerability, and often from the margins, to welcome the stranger in his or her strangeness. Hence reductive notions that domesticate or romanticize hospitality should be challenged as part of the search for a theological account that takes embodiment seriously. This theology is not undertaken from a position of aloof power but is cruciform, shaped by the cross. It is proposed that welcoming the stranger in oneself enables bodies to welcome other strangers. Notions of normality are challenged, arguing that all bodies who seek safety in Christian communities should be welcomed, albeit that hospitality is not to be separated from processes of discernment. The main argument is built around the hypothesis that an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality in an urban (congregational) context centres around the notions of marginality, proximity and vulnerability.

Uittreksel

Hierdie studie het ten doel om aan te toon dat 'n bevredigende begrip van Christelike gasvryheid verstaan dat dit 'n beliggaamde praktyk is, wat in nabyheid en weerloosheid, en dikwels van die marges, daarna streef om die vreemdeling te verwelkom in sy/haar vreemdheid. Daarom is dit nodig om vereenvoudigde of verromantiseerde idees van gasvryheid uit te daag as deel van die soeke na 'n deeglike teologiese beredenering wat beliggaming ernstig neem. Hierdie teologie word nie bedryf vanuit 'n onbetrokke magsoffposisie nie, maar neem die vorm van die kruis aan, en is gevorm deur die kruis. Voorts word dit gestel dat ten einde die vreemdeling ander te kan verwelkom, dit nodig is om die vreemdeling in die self te verwelkom. Konsepte oor wat normaal is word uitgedaag, met die suggestie dat alle liggame wat veiligheid in Christelike gemeenskappe soek, verwelkom behoort te word, hoewel die proses nie geskei kan word van onderskeiding nie. Die hoof-argument word gebou om die hipotese dat 'n bevredigende verstaan van Christelike gasvryheid in 'n stedelike (gemeentelike) konteks rondom die gedagtes van marginaliteit, nabyheid en kwesbaarheid sentreer.

Let us not seek to solidify, to turn the otherness of the foreigner
into a thing.

Let us merely touch it, brush by it, without giving it a permanent structure.

- Julia Kristeva

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 In search of an adequate theology of hospitality?

This research is undertaken in order to attempt a formulation of an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality from and for an urban (congregational) context. In order to do this, or so this thesis argues, reductive understandings of hospitality need to be challenged. It will be argued, furthermore, that Christian hospitality in urban contexts should incorporate marginal bodies, thus bringing bodies within actual proximity of each other, enabling in the process the exposure to interdependent (bodily) vulnerability. In short, Christian hospitality is about *being in touch*.

The need for bodies to be welcomed, to have access to a nurturing community and a sense of belonging, are – or so one can argue – universal human longings. In the biblical narratives, this need is traced back to the first displaced ones: Adam and Eve. Their displacement is a sudden and harsh one: from the provision and safety of the garden to the uncertainty and physical labour of the great wide world with its thorns and stubborn soil. Not long after Adam and Eve's supplanting, they are confronted with another (even more harsh) form of displacement when their son Cain slaughters their other son Abel. Cain, of course, resorts to this act of violence and ultimate exclusion based on his perception that his brother is more accepted and welcomed by God than himself. This act, the Bible tells us, results in Cain being a displaced and vulnerable man for the rest of his life.

Miroslav Volf (1996:92) explains how Cain and Abel's story portrays this drama:

No other biblical text describes better the anatomy, dynamics, and power of exclusion than the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16). On the surface it is a narrative about one brother killing the other. But Cain can be taken to allude to the Kenites, the descendants of Cain and Israel's southern neighbors. The story of Cain and Abel is then not only an example of rivalry between two brothers, but it narrates the structure of encounter between 'them' and 'us'.

Cain effectively displaces himself, but is also the product of complex human dynamics: Volf again: “For within primal history, the story about a murderous ‘them’ is a story about a murderous ‘us’. Cain is ‘them’ *and* Cain is ‘us’; Cain is all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve in relation to their brothers and sisters.” (1996:93)

If Volf is to be taken seriously, the often over-simplified categories of *us* and *them* are not so simple. I have the power to displace but am similarly vulnerable to involuntary displacement.

Displacement, in fact, whether used in an anthropological, psychological or theological context, is a key concept for the argument of this thesis. Zygmunt Bauman (2004:5) writes that in our time:

The production of ‘human waste’ or more correctly wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant’, that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of order-building (each order casts some parts of the extant population as ‘out of place’, ‘unfit’ or ‘undesirable’).

The notion of displacement points to the need of the vulnerable for protection, justice, and hospitality. The idea of hospitality is a theme that is often portrayed in the biblical narratives. One can think, for instance, of the story of Abraham and Sarah’s strange encounter with three visitors (Gen. 18), or the teaching of Jesus on extending kindness and hospitality to the least of these (Matt. 25). Many examples can be added. We find narratives pertaining to welcoming and chasing away, granting and denying access, providing shelter, offering cups of water, and announcing that the inn is full. Thus hospitality, as extending a welcome to the disconnected, the forlorn, the needy, the

stranger, the outsider,¹ has a central place in the Bible, as it also has in many other religious and cultural texts and contexts.

In his 2006 book *Engele as Gaste?* (Angels as Guests?), Robert Vosloo underlines the mysterious exchange that takes place when hospitality is extended to the other, indicating the possibility of the human-divine interconnectedness in welcoming the stranger. The title of this book refers to Hebrews 13:2, where the followers of Christ are exhorted to live a life marked by hospitality with the intrinsic possibility that by extending hospitality to strangers, it becomes possible to host not only human bodies but also angelic (divine) ones. In her book *Making Room* (1999), Christine Pohl emphasises this mystery when she refers to Jesus's teaching on the final judgment (Matt. 25):

This has been the most important passage for the entire tradition on Christian hospitality. 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' resounds throughout the ancient texts, and contemporary practitioners of hospitality refer to this text more than to any other passage. Acts of welcoming the stranger, or leaving someone outside cold and hungry, take on intensely heightened significance when it is Jesus himself who experiences the consequences of our ministry or lack of it.

It will also be argued in this thesis that hospitality can be inhibited by power dynamics. It is easier for the stranger (powerless, disconnected) to extend hospitality to a fellow stranger (on equal footing) than it is for a settler (established, able to help, well-connected) to extend hospitality to a stranger (drifting, helpless, disconnected).

¹ Even in this sequence of words, the inherent power constructs locked up in the notion of hospitality are evident: if the disconnected exist, then there must be those who are connected; if the forlorn, then those who belong; if the needy then those who are able to provide, etc. Hence, a discussion on hospitality – also on Christian hospitality – will indirectly also deal with power relations and how the gospel speaks to power relations.

1.2 All welcome?

The notion of hospitality invites critical reflection and calls for interrogation. Can all ever really be welcome? Does the Christian message, the good news of the gospel, mean that its adherents should at all times welcome all people? When does a situation arise where a 'not welcome' sign is required? Can such a sign even be considered in a Christian context? Pohl (1999:129) points to this dilemma: "Because Christian hospitality reflects divine hospitality, when it fails it is especially devastating. Claims to have 'no more room' are particularly problematic when we reflect on the abundance of God's household. There is a certain moral horror associated with turning persons away; when refugees are excluded and left in danger, or when homeless persons are left outside on freezing nights, it is rarely morally sufficient to say that there was not enough room".

And what about behaviour? Should all people's behaviour be welcomed by the church? What about the ethical appeal of the good news? How does a church/ church community/ church body decide where the boundaries pertaining to ethics/ behaviour are? What kind of behaviour should be excluded by the church? Is there *any* behaviour that should be excluded by the church?

If there are no safety guards at a church's doors and everybody is allowed access to a worship service, what kind of security measures will the attendees be confronted with once inside? If the visitor happens to be gay and is allowed access to the building and the activities, but is met inside by a dogma that excludes or condemns homosexual people and same sex relationships, will she/he not feel unwelcome?

Pohl (1999:130) suggests that there are situations where 'No' should be the response: "Sometimes welcome must be limited and distinctions made, however, if only for the sake of other guests or members already within the community".

But what, or rather who, would determine the refusal of the guest? Is an imminent threat (to life or property or good morals) good enough reason to refuse entry? Or are the boundary lines also drawn along ethical matters? Which ethical matters may be considered serious enough to warrant the refusal of access? May access be conditional? These questions haunt any attempt to develop an adequate theology of Christian hospitality. It is actually by being open to the stranger that one becomes vulnerable, but – paradoxically – one also opens oneself up for blessing. If the stranger is not merely or necessarily an enemy, he or she might receive a different status. This points in the direction of a different ethical stance.

Julia Kristeva (1991:2) writes about the possibility of the assimilation of the stranger into an established group: “While in the most savage human groups the foreigner was an enemy to be destroyed, he has become, within the scope of religious and ethical constructs, a different human being who, provided he espouses them, may be assimilated into the fraternities of the ‘wise’, the ‘just’ or the ‘native’”.

For now, we turn to some introductory remarks and questions about the embodiment of ‘welcome’ in a Christian context. Christian communities (like local churches/ congregations) are generally perceived to be hospitable environments. Church buildings’ signage often proclaims proudly: ‘All Welcome’. The ‘All Welcome’ signs may proclaim a gesture (the inclusion of people/ visitors/ newcomers) that seems to be in sync with the Christian message, but is this the case in practice? How is Christian hospitality embodied by Christian churches/ communities in urban contexts? How is ‘all’ defined and understood? And how is the ‘Welcome’ embodied?

The need to challenge an over-simplified, romanticised and reductionist notion of Christian hospitality must be acknowledged at the outset. This thesis seeks to gain clarity on a radicalised notion of Christian hospitality set in an urban context.

The research is undertaken in an urban, ever-changing, extremely dynamic and globalising context. More will be said later in the thesis on the social location of the

researcher and the Dutch Reformed Church congregation where he is pastor. Suffice it to say for now that complications in welcoming others are brought about by high (security) fences around church property, dynamic heterogeneous demographics in neighbourhoods (with more fencing) and ambivalent statements/ doctrinal debates (perceived as fences by many) on contentious issues, like the discourse on the Belhar Confession², church unity, homosexuality and the ordination of gay clergy.

These ‘fences’ determine who is in and who is out, who is welcome and who is not, despite the ‘All Welcome’ notices at the gates. Perhaps unintentionally, church fences tend to keep strangers out and the familiar in.

Over against this, as Christine Pohl affirms, Christian hospitality has to do with welcoming *the stranger*. In describing the early church’s understanding of hospitality, she points out that “[h]ospitality meant extending to strangers a quality of kindness usually reserved for friends and family” (1999:19).

Various other writers subscribe to a similar definition. Letty Russell (2009:19) defines hospitality as “the practice of God’s welcome by reaching *across difference* to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis” (emphasis added).

If Russell is to be taken seriously, Christian communities (and theology) should explore questions such as: If Christian hospitality is about welcoming *the stranger* or welcoming those who are ‘different’, can our practices be deemed hospitable? Are we not merely engaged in welcoming the ‘familiar’ instead of welcoming the ‘stranger’? If we say that we do ‘reach across’, who are we in touch with and what is our position when we reach for the door? Do we stand in a powerful place? From where we stand, do we communicate that we are dominant? Does our role as host reinforce existing power imbalances or does it create community?

² A Reformed Confession adopted in draft form in 1982, and officially in 1986, by the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church amidst the theological struggles in apartheid South Africa. A theological engagement with the notions of unity, reconciliation and justice is at the heart of this confession.

My own situatedness is that of a full-time pastor in an urban Christian congregation. Formally, we are part of the Dutch Reformed Church. This is traditionally an Afrikaans-speaking denomination, still struggling to come to terms with its own situatedness and identity within a complex, multi-layered ideological burden (apartheid) and a complicated – colonialist – history.

I am pastor to a marginal³ parish in Johannesburg⁴, South Africa. Founded by the visionary Dr Gert Swart in 1966, the Andrew Murray Congregation sought from its inception to include and welcome. Crossing the (rather obvious) fence of language, it chose to use English as language right from its first worship services. This made the congregation an accessible space, allowing various cultural groups to be able to participate in and enjoy both the liturgy and the multi-cultural⁵ social interaction.

Andrew Murray is also a congregation where in recent years we have been challenged by the intersection between our theology (an embodied theology of hospitality) and the

³ That is, marginal in terms of its positioning within the denomination the congregation belongs to. Where Andrew Murray Congregation has a distinctive multi-cultural identity (see footnote 5), the average Dutch Reformed congregation is homogenous in demographical character.

⁴ Johannesburg represents a dynamic demographical urban context, marked by perpetual movement, both of travellers (by choice) and migrants (by force). Here, street corners are dotted with beggars, people who are presumably living on the street, those disconnected from the predominant way of making a living in an urban context. On closer enquiry, these people are identified as displaced, often originating from countries located to the north of South Africa.

⁵ ‘Multi-cultural’ here refers not only to the obvious cultural expressions like skin colour/ language, but sub-cultures like generations and sexual orientations/ expressions. Diversity has been one of the trademarks of the congregation since its inception. In a newspaper article dated 01 May 1972, the congregation’s founder, Dr Gert Swart, is quoted as saying: “Die NG Kerk preek in Zoeloe en Swahili en Tswana, en as ons die Woord vir die Bantoe (sic) in hul eie taal bring, kan ons nie ons verantwoordelikheid teenoor die anderstalige Blankes ontken nie, dan word ons ‘n rassistiese kerk. Ons moet leer dat volkseenheid ook in verskeidenheid kan bestaan.” And: “Ons is nie inheems nie, ons is almal immigrante. Die Afrikaner moet weer word soos die oumense. Ons moet meer gasvry word, liefdevol en die immigrant nie sien as ‘n bedreiging nie.” (Hoofstraat, 01.05.1972)

complexities of our urban context. Johannesburg has – in recent years – been troubled at least twice by eruptions of xenophobia⁶ and xenophobic violence, to the degree that lives were lost and churches/ faith communities were challenged to be safe places for those under siege. Feeling these complexities ‘bump’ against my own skin, the abovementioned intersection has become a fertile, energy-infused place⁷ where the image of the ever-welcoming Christ and his spread-out arms sometimes are challenged by the need to cover oneself in a protective gesture or to shy away from others because of an imminent threat.

This study also stems from a particular place as it forms part of an MTh course with a focus on Religion, Gender and Health. This MTh programme sensitized one to, amongst other things, the need for a critique of patriarchy and to address the church’s positioning in terms of the inherent dominance of patriarchal and heteronormative thinking systems and behaviour, often upheld by pious rhetoric.

Part of the immediate landscape of the denomination our congregation and I am part of is that one of the contentious topics (arguably the most contentious current issue) on the church’s agenda is same-sex relationships and, more specifically, whether a) Dutch Reformed clergy should be allowed to officiate at civil union ceremonies⁸ or not, and whether b) ordained gay clergy need to remain celibate or not.

⁶ Christa Kuljian describes these events and one inner city church’s embodiment of Christian hospitality during the xenophobic outbreaks in her book *Sanctuary* (2013).

⁷ Andrew Murray Congregation has joined forces with Echo Youth (based in Pretoria, see www.echoyouth.co.za) to start a community residing on the church grounds. Echo@work provides accommodation and community to late adolescents who would otherwise be left to fend for themselves. One of the current members of the community is a 20-year-old Congolese man who fled from the Congo after being the victim of human trafficking, forced into armed conflict. Echo@work makes use of an application process whereby a social worker assesses applicants, implying that some applicants are welcomed, while others (who, according to our judgment) may pose a danger to inhabitants/church staff due to e.g. addictions, are turned away.

⁸ South African law currently makes provision for same-sex unions to be made official, but they are not regarded/ described as marriages. At present, ordained Dutch Reformed pastors who are marriage officers are not authorised by the denomination to officiate at the legalisation of same-sex unions.

But this discussion is not an abstract, intangible issue or a principle that is discussed or a clinical study consisting simply of facts and figures. This contentious debate is about people, essentially about whether to let gay people ‘in’, whether being a person with a homosexual orientation is too ‘other’ to fully welcome and whether the church can accept that a same-sex relationship can be something that is blessed by the church.

These are at their heart matters directly related to hospitality, which is, in turn, about access. John Caputo (2007:76) writes: “But if hospitality is what we say it is – that is welcoming the other – then ought it not to be a matter of welcoming those who are unwelcome? Should it not be extended beyond our neighbours to strangers? Beyond our friends to our enemies? Beyond the invited to the uninvited?”

And:

In fact, is not the very act of invitation foreign to the idea of hospitality – genuine or unconditional hospitality – inasmuch ‘inviting’ is a selection process whereby one puts in place in advance a set of prior conditions under which the hospitality will be exercised? Would not the most radical or unconditional hospitality be a hospitality without invitation, a welcoming of the uninvited? (Caputo 2007:76).

The broader international backdrop during the time of this research involves issues pertaining to refugees, triggered mainly by the displacement of large numbers of people, fleeing from countries like Syria and Iraq, who are mainly seeking refuge in Europe. These events are triggering new – and enriching existing – discourses on hospitality, tribalism, national identities, religion, religious extremism and global safety.

Kristeva (1991:38) already describes in an earlier work the French canvas on which some of the abovementioned dynamics are unfolding: “Nowhere is one more a foreigner than in France. Having neither the tolerance of Anglo-American Protestants, nor the absorbant ease of Latin Americans, nor the rejecting as well as the assimilating curiosity of the

Germans or Slavs, the French set a compact social texture and an unbeatable national pride against foreigners”.

Working on the completion of this thesis in November 2015, days after the ISIS⁹ terrorist attacks in Paris that claimed the lives of at least 129 people, the irony in Kristeva’s (1991:39) observation is striking:

And yet, one is nowhere better as a foreigner than in France. Since you remain incurably different and unacceptable, you are an object of fascination: one notices you, one talks about you, one hates you or admires you, or both at the same time. But you are not an ordinary, negligible presence, you are not a Mr or Mrs Nobody. You are a problem, a desire – positive or negative, never neutral.

It is against the backdrop of these introductory remarks on local context and global reach that this study is placed as it seeks to articulate an adequate theological account of Christian hospitality as an embodied practice.

1.3 Problem statement and research problem

The aim of this thesis is to review various thinkers’ perspectives on Christian hospitality and to broaden understandings of what Christian hospitality is and how Christian hospitality can be embodied in an urban context. In order to move closer this understanding, it will be required to:

- i) Gain conceptual clarity on Christian hospitality
- ii) Critique reductive understandings of Christian hospitality

⁹ An acronym for Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIL: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. John Caputo (2003) writes on terror in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on several US targets: “With the collapse of the twin towers the whole façade of a ‘war’ on rogue ‘states’ also collapsed. Now it is clear that the ‘enemy’ is no longer an identifiable ‘state’ with diplomats and a capital city, but elusive bands of faceless, stateless terrorists”.

At the outset, it needs to be acknowledged that current definitions of and perspectives on the notion of hospitality differ dramatically from biblical times. Several associations with the term ‘hospitality’ are commonplace. On one end of the spectrum, a person may link the idea to women offering services after a worship service (a noble, moral thing). On the other, someone else may associate hospitality with services of a radically different (immoral) kind¹⁰. Russell again: “What do we mean by hospitality? In the church we often think of hospitality as what the women offer after the worship service on Sunday. (...) In other contexts, the idea of hospitality is reduced to sexual services offered by ‘ladies of the night’” (2009:19).

A thorough demarcation of what is meant by ‘hospitality’, and more specifically ‘Christian hospitality’, is therefore needed. It also needs to be stated that I am painfully aware of the possible paternalistic weight of some of the notions/ terms used here. Concepts like ‘stranger’ and ‘other’ can comfortably be used to uphold existing power structures and hence not challenge socially (or ecclesially) held notions of hospitality, boundaries, inclusion and a faithful expression of radical Christian hospitality.

1.4 Methodology

The nature of the proposed study requires critical engagement with relevant literature within the fields of theology and philosophy on the topic of hospitality. This study will therefore be conducted as a literature study in the field of systematic theology. The aim is to obtain a more informed and nuanced view on the topic of Christian hospitality from the selected literature. The selected authors approach the topic from different

¹⁰ Note that in both references, services related to hospitality have women as agents. This begs the question whether, in general, the notion of hospitality is regarded as something embodied exclusively (or mostly) by females. In other words, is hospitality *per se* a ‘feminine’ phenomenon? The use of the word ‘feminine’ in itself raises questions, as Connell (1995:3) notes: “In many practical situations the language of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ raises few doubts. But the same terms, on logical examination, waver like the Danube mist. They prove remarkably elusive and difficult to define.”

perspectives, ranging from that of Russell (a lesbian minister) on the theme of exclusion and justice pertaining to gay clergy (or the lack thereof), to Elizabeth Newman, who argues strongly in favour of liturgical practices as expressions of God's hospitality rooted in the Eucharist.

In certain sections, in order to contextualise an argument or to provide additional insight, a narrative hermeneutic¹¹ will be evident. Underlining the importance of this hermeneutic lens, Denise Ackermann (2001) says the following: "Telling stories is intrinsic to claiming one's identity and in the process finding impulses for hope. Narrative has a further function. Apart from claiming identity and naming the evil, narrative has a sense-making function. The very act of telling the story is an act of making sense of an often incomprehensible situation, of a suffering and chaotic world in which people wrestle with understanding and in so doing seek to experience relief."

John de Gruchy (2006:4) echoes this sentiment when he says: "From the beginning of history we humans have told stories, whether in word, dance, drama or painting, to make sense of our place in the world; stories about our origins, who we are, why the world is like it is, and how we should live. (...) Telling such stories is a necessary and potent way of handing on wisdom from one generation to another, one culture to another, about our common humanity and distinct personal identities."

The researcher's preference for a feminist theory of praxis¹² also needs to be stated. From a methodological perspective, this means that experiences (of people/ bodies) in social

¹¹ Narrative here referring to the re-telling of the author's experience. In terms of the inclusion of experience, James Nelson (1992:20) refers to the Wesleyan heritage: "The Wesleyan heritage argues that there are four interweaving sources of revelation and truth for the Christian: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. If we are to take that 'quadrilateral', or fourfold formula seriously, we are reminded that reason and experience are vitally important as well as scripture and tradition." Phiri and Nadar (2006:8) refer to the power of story when they say: "By using the established and time-honored method of storytelling, we have critiqued traditional practices, answering in the affirmative to Audre Lorde's question as to whether the master's tools can after all be used to break down the master's house."

¹² Roughly paraphrasing Denise Ackermann (2003).

and historic contexts are taken seriously, that there should be a continuous exchange between theoretical reflection and actual experience/ praxis with the aim of liberating both women and men.

In Ackermann's own words: "A feminist theology of praxis is interested in women's diverse *circumstances*, in what we *do* for the healing and liberating of ourselves and our communities and what we *think* about our circumstances and our actions in terms of our faith. The aim of such theology is healing and liberating praxis." (2003:36)

Ackermann explains her perspective on feminist theory: "Feminism is a comprehensive ideology which is rooted in women's experience of sexist oppression and discrimination, is critical of patriarchy, and embraces an alternative vision for humankind and the earth. At its best, feminism is an egalitarian movement, alive to the oppression of women wherever it occurs *and* always concerned with *any* kind of discrimination, because it seeks justice." (2003:32)

Serene Jones provides useful background to the feminist project and the resulting feminist theology: "Their concern is not only for the liberation of women but for *all* who are broken, physically and in spirit, by the oppressions of our world. (...) We are struggling for the liberation of women and *all people*" (2000:6, author's emphasis).

With this remark, Jones is hinting to the notion of marginality, one I will return to later.

While reviewing the literature, the following themes will be highlighted in search of a clear understanding of what embodying Christian hospitality in an urban context may require: 1) Challenging reductive understandings of hospitality in a patriarchal context; 2) Engaging with the promise and pitfall arising from the experience of marginality and being marginalised (marginal bodies) 3) Risking bodily proximity; and 4) Embracing vulnerability. These themes will be the focus of the various main chapters of the thesis.

In chapter 2, reductive understandings of Christian hospitality are unpacked and challenged. These include romanticised notions of hospitality often expressed by church communities in ‘safe’ acts that can be deemed hospitable, like serving tea to the familiar other after church on a Sunday or serving soup to the unfamiliar at a soup kitchen on a Monday morning. In order to move closer to an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality in urban contexts, the framework that sees these practices as the only expressions of hospitality needs to be interrogated and re-imagined.

Chapter 3 looks at marginal bodies and how hospitality cannot be embodied from a central core. In order to embody Christian hospitality, engagement on the margins, with those who are marginalised, by bodies who recognise their own marginality is necessary. This is not a theoretical undertaking but a practical one, done with the body. Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s thoughts, it is argued that in order to make the welcoming of the stranger possible, we need to acknowledge the stranger in ourselves.

In chapter 4, bodily proximity comes to the fore. Christian hospitality is an embodied reality, precisely because it is not a theoretical exercise but a physical expression of welcoming the stranger. The discussion is rooted in the Eucharist, the proximity of the Body of Christ. Here it is argued that as Christ is given to us, so we are given to the world. A case is made for the continued inter-connectedness between worship, Eucharist and (embodied) hospitality.¹³

Chapter 5 admits the inherent vulnerability brought forward by the embodiment of Christian hospitality. When the stranger is welcomed, the door opened, not only does the vulnerable – possibly needy – stranger arrive; danger may also present itself in the form

¹³ Adrian Thatcher (2011:112) makes an interesting link between the Eucharist and desire: “The Eucharist is erotic principally because in it is enacted God’s infinite desire for us. The sending of the Son and the breaking of his body are the measure of it. It is strong confirmation of the conviction that God infinitely desires us, and together with Christ’s crucifixion, it is the principal ground for believing that God is Love. The crucifixion should be understood less as the death of desire, and more as the intensification of desire, God’s desire, to become one with us.”

of the violent other. It is pointed out that both the guest and the host are vulnerable. Here the issue of vulnerability is not discussed from the perspective of the potentially vulnerable host whose body, goods and status may be the target of violence, but that the guest also brings vulnerability into the encounter.

A connecting thread in all of these chapters is the notion of embodiment, hence the focus on *marginal* bodies, *bodily* proximity and vulnerable *embodiment*. The integral place of bodies within an adequate theology of hospitality is thus affirmed. James Nelson (1992:43) provides helpful insight into the place of bodies and our ethical relationship to others:

(...) there are strong connections between body alienation and the propensity toward dichotomous reality perceptions: the more I feel distant from my body, the greater my tendency to populate my perceived world with sharply etched ‘either-ors’ (either me or not-me, we or they, good or bad, right or wrong, black or white, sick or well, true or false, heterosexual or homosexual). Our body realities do shape our moral perceptions in ways we have seldom realized” (1992:43).

Chapter 2: Reductive understandings of hospitality in a patriarchal context

This exploration of what embodied Christian hospitality in an urban context can be, takes place against the backdrop of a patriarchal¹⁴ context, not only in a specific society (Johannesburg, South Africa), but also in a specific denomination of the Christian church (the Dutch Reformed Church). In order to move towards an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality, reductionist notions of hospitality within the abovementioned context need to be confronted.

In the ensuing chapter, it will be argued that while it is possible to merely research/ view the notion of hospitality from a Christian perspective, it may result in a fixation on reductive understandings of Christian hospitality. A deeper probe will therefore be necessary, asking questions about particular embodiments/ expressions of Christian hospitality and seeking examples thereof.

A sub-theme in this argument will be that when Christian communities ‘settle’, they run the risk of becoming complacent and comfortable in their own skin, resulting in romanticised expressions of hospitality, like ‘serving the poor’ by ‘reaching out’ or ‘getting involved’ in community projects. Resulting practices would be non-threatening to the status quo and to existing power structures, more intent on maintaining equilibrium than engaging in transformative ways of living in community with others.

¹⁴ Patriarchy is described by Cranny-Francis *et al* (2003:15) as follows: “Patriarchy is a social system in which structural differences in privilege, power and authority are invested in masculinity and the cultural, economic and/or social positions of men.” It is glaringly obvious that the Dutch Reformed Church is governed by white, Afrikaans-speaking, mainly older and heterosexual men. From where I am engaging with the topic of Christian hospitality, it has to be stated that this prominent presence of a well-established patriarchal system not only shapes the landscape of any discussion on who is in and out, but in fact represents a whole world of inequality, peculiar power dynamics and, to some extent, even blatant injustice.

Therefore, in order to engage in a fruitful conversation about the embodiment of Christian hospitality in an urban context, it is necessary to challenge commonly held (reductive) understandings of hospitality, and especially hospitality in ‘Christian’ environments¹⁵.

2.1 Too complacent, cozy and sentimental?

Elizabeth Newman (2007:23), quoting Henri Nouwen, points out that hospitality typically: “...brings to mind ‘tea parties, bland conversation and a general atmosphere of coziness.’ We could add to this forced smiles, banal pleasantries and *nice* manners. Hospitality, like many other Christian practices today, carries with it a kind of sentimental baggage”. She continues: “A sentimental hospitality lacks substance” (2007:23).

Newman dares to diagnose/ explicate this condition by linking current (sentimentalised) expressions of hospitality to modernity’s influence and implies that a peculiar complacency has taken hold of the church. She furthermore links this condition to the belief that the church has “nothing distinctive to offer... (and) ‘hangs on’ to Christian language but refuses to live out a genuine alternative” (2007:23). By critiquing the lack of distinctiveness in the church, Newman is suggesting that simply speaking the language of inclusion or hospitality is not enough. Christian hospitality needs to be embodied. This is also the assumption of this thesis as it seeks to flesh out the implications of this affirmation.

Pohl (1999:5) points out that Christian hospitality was initially a transformative practice, redefining social strata and establishing new communities: “Early Christian writers claimed that transcending social and ethnic differences by sharing meals, homes and

¹⁵ These can include, but are not limited to, communities of faith/ churches and non-profit organisations that operate under Christian auspices.

worship with persons of different backgrounds was a proof of the truth of the Christian faith”.

But Pohl (2012:165) also explains that it is possible to use hospitality to only serve our own purposes: “In many (...) understandings (...) we view hospitality as a means to another end – achieving business success, enhancing our image, or growing our numbers”. She explores the inherent allure of settling for a comfortable (reductionist) expression of hospitality: “In the fourth century, church leaders warned clergy – who might be tempted to use hospitality to gain favour with the powerful – to welcome instead the poorest people to their tables. In doing so, they would have Christ as their guest” (1999:5).

Pohl’s remark points to a critique aimed at sanitised models of Christian hospitality that has the effect of keeping potentially harmful power relations (read: patriarchy) in place. And throughout the history of Christianity the temptation has loomed large to domesticate hospitality in service of the status quo, hence excluding the other and otherness, merely reinforcing the same.

For instance, modernist and neo-orthodox (or confessionalistic) theologies, practices, formulations, declarations and resulting processes of (mainly intellectual/ rational) discernment, decision-making and identity formation, have created (amongst other things, especially in the Reformed tradition) a sanitised ecclesial model, where ‘the church’ is ringfenced, often by doctrinal statements (we believe *this* and reject *that*)¹⁶.

One can also argue that a radicalised, embodied notion of Christian hospitality not only critiques strands of modernist and neo-orthodox theologies, but presents an alternative in

¹⁶ At the time of writing this thesis, the Dutch Reformed Church is finding itself in a precarious position with regard to same-sex relationships. The General Synod decided on 9 October 2015 to opt for a more welcoming stance, dropping the fence to make more room for gay members and gay clergy. On 16 November 2015, an appeal to this decision was considered by the moderamen of the General Synod, effectively putting the decision on hold for at least two years until the next meeting of the General Synod.

the form of marginal Christian communities engaging with the margins, marked by the willingness to risk proximity and to embrace vulnerability. Hence the case for a theology of embodied hospitality, for being in touch.

It is argued by John Caputo (and others¹⁷) that modern and neo-orthodox notions of God have resulted in a tamed God, having reduced (and still reducing) God to the rational, cerebral and intellectual, making theology (and by implication ecclesial practice) a sanitised, controlled project¹⁸.

What can a potential alternative be? What can a departure from rigid orthodoxy entail? One suggestion would be to adopt a theology that is open to surprise, to mystery, to the unexpected and the unpredictable. To quote Caputo (in Kearney and Semonovitch 2011:83): ‘The name of God is the name of trouble, the name of a disturbance’.

One can indeed contend that the disturbance will come when the body of the stranger is welcomed, when the other is included. And since welcoming the stranger is an embodied act, the outcome cannot be final, predicted or absolute.

As alternative to any ‘absolute’ or final talk about God, Richard Kearney (2010) proposes the concept of anatheism, a return to God after God. He explains it as a movement, saying that “(it) refuses all absolute talk about the absolute, negative or positive; for it acknowledges that the absolute can never be understood absolutely by any single person or religion” (2010:16).

¹⁷ E.g. Richard Kearney and Elizabeth Newman.

¹⁸ From where I stand, this has indeed been the case. The Dutch Reformed Church is a telling example of an institutional church that is struggling to come to terms (doctrinally, ethically and theologically speaking) with itself in an emerging (postmodern, post-apartheid) context. Synods still gather to make decisions on ethical questions and are struggling to formulate ‘what we believe’. The recent (failed) attempts to make room for the Confession of Belhar in the DRC’s confessional basis is a case in point. Richard Kearney argues convincingly that theology can succeed in turning dogma/ doctrines into sacred things, all the while missing out on what is actually sacred.

Kearney's anatheism also serves to host a fruitful inter-religious dialogue, not seeing complacent Christian theology as (the) absolute, but adopting a willingness to extend hospitality to the other (religions).

Kearney's suggestion is rather radical: "That Master God must die so that the God of interconfessional hospitality can be born. And, insofar as religious dogma has often served as vehicle for infantile fear and dependency, the interreligious God may be described as a postdogmatic God" (2010:52).

Kearney is making the point that complacent orthodox theology and rigid religious dogma have a clear purpose: to keep fear at bay by attempting to create security and certainty. He is attesting that 'God after God' can and should be so radically hospitable that it makes interreligious dialogue possible and even fruitful.

2.2 The problem with romanticised hospitality

Church communities can easily busy themselves with well-intended but superficial and 'religious' acts of hospitality. They can invite fellow churches (or leadership bodies, fraternals or youth groups), offer meals and serve cups of different kinds. They can even run soup kitchens (hence extending hospitality to 'outsiders') and serve those without the means to fend for themselves. They can control who attends and who sits where. They can decide who will be serving and who will be on the receiving end of what and when. In this process, it is highly likely that 'sameness' will be the binding factor. Exchanges will be kind and polite, ideas will show a great deal of similarity and convictions will mostly be shared.

Newman (2007:26) explains what the (perhaps unintended?) consequence of a privatised notion of hospitality may be: "This hospitality is almost always extended to people who are more or less like oneself in terms of status and class". A gathering of like-minded people (or groups of people) therefore runs the risk of essentially being extensions of the

self, reinforcing existing (organisational, inner) power dynamics, lacking in spiritedness and closing itself to the possibility of the God-event.

This, linking to Caputo's thoughts, is a 'lame' expression of Christian hospitality, symptomatic of playing it safe, keeping to the familiar, inviting the same and being essentially closed to the possibility of God being revealed (embodied) in 'dangerous' encounters. Says Caputo:

The name of God is the name of a limit-state, an extremity, a name in which we are driven to the extreme, our faculties stretched beyond themselves, beyond the possible to the impossible. The people of God are, for better or worse, impossible people, people with a taste for the impossible, with a taste for the worst violence and the most radical peace (in Kearney and Semonovitch 2011:83).

He continues:

Hospitality kicks into high gear when we welcome the unwelcome; otherwise we are just reinforcing the same. Just so, love builds up a head of steam when we love the unlovable, and faith when we believe the unbelievable, all of these being fetching variations on the possibility of the impossible. So hospitality is not possible without this impossibility, without risk, without a willingness to put oneself at risk, without putting oneself 'out', outside, exposed to the stranger (2011:86).

Caputo (unintentionally?) continues by offering a diagnosis (albeit by implication) to this condition¹⁹:

I am not interested in 'religion' but in God. 'Religion' is what Meister Eckhart warns us against – fasting and vigils and observances. I go further: I am not interested in the name of God but in the event that is harbored in the name of God. For the name of God, as dangerous as it is saving, as life-giving as it is death-dealing, contains the uncontainable event of a provocation, a solicitation, an

¹⁹ Clinging on to reductive understandings (and practices) of hospitality, 'playing it safe', harbouring sameness.

interruption, and a promise, to which we are called upon to offer hospitality (2009:89).

Here, Caputo underlines the notion of inviting the event that is harboured in the name of God. As seen, he makes it clear that this invitation implies a departure from safety, from control and familiarity. This event is made possible by embodying hospitality.

Pohl (1999:106) also radicalises the concept of Christian hospitality when she explores the notion that a peculiar, unprecedented power is unlocked when hospitality is offered by unexpected hosts:

The most transformative expressions of hospitality, both historically and in our own time, are associated with hosts who are liminal, marginal, or at the lower end of the social order. These hosts are essentially threshold or bridge people, connected in some ways to the larger society but distinct from it either in actual social situation or in self-imposed distance. *Without these crucial dimensions of marginality and liminality, the relations between hosts and guests often serve the more conservative function of reinforcing existing social relations and status hierarchies* (emphasis added).

Pohl's analysis sheds light (by implication) on some of the most prevalent dynamics in Christian churches/ church communities. Quite often, in consumerist societies like certain parts of Johannesburg, Christian groups congregate around shared doctrines, demographics, sociographics or even shared interests. By doing so, the potential (disruptively transformative) power of diversity is contained and tamed. This results in 'powerful' (often also male-dominated) communities: powerful to proclaim (beliefs, convictions, the Word of God) and to sustain (by generous tithes/ contributions enabling – amongst other things – brick and mortar facilities for the exclusive use by the particular group).

One result of this structuring of Christian communities/ identities, is that sameness not only produces, but reinforces and upholds caricatures of the other. Russell (2009:43)

implicitly critiques the possible intolerance of the other brought about by organising groups (churches) around sameness: “In facing the challenge of a world of abundant difference and more abundant experiences of exclusion and suffering, often rooted in a disdain for the ‘other’, a feminist hermeneutic of hospitality can make it clear that in God’s sight no one is ‘other’”.

2.3 Daring definitions

Speaking from a broad spectrum of contexts and experiences, several scholars (theologians, philosophers) agree that Christian hospitality involves the act of welcoming the stranger. This broad formulation is rooted in the biblical texts, most notably Abraham and Sara’s welcoming of the three sojourners in Genesis 18, the Old Testament exhortations to care for the stranger and the words of Jesus in Mathew 25 pertaining to the last judgment.

In the abovementioned examples, the one thing the strangers have in common is displacement (or disconnection). The strangers approaching Abraham’s tent in Genesis 18 are removed from their place, families and resources. The strangers referred to by Jesus in Matthew 25 are marginalised people, the ‘least of these’, isolated (by imprisonment) and vulnerable (without clothes or resources). One could indeed ask whether Mathew 25 is referring to justice, to acts of justice, by saying that when the marginalised are included and tended to, justice is embodied.

Russell (2009:19) situates her definition of Christian hospitality within the context of diversity, justice, and healing: “Hospitality is the practice of God’s welcome by reaching across difference to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis”. With this, Russell effectively addresses the seemingly innocent toxicity of hospitality offered from a power base or without mutuality. (It is another question altogether whether arms-length, superficial acts of hospitality can be deemed Christian at all.)

Russell (2009:80) also underlines the difficulties involved in practising Christian hospitality: “While the idea of hospitality sounds good, it is difficult to practice. People often happily embrace the concept when they imagine it means having friends over for dinner or serving coffee and goodies after church. But hospitality with strangers evokes a very different feeling”.

In similar vein, Newman (2007:14) makes the case that Christian hospitality “...names our graced participation in the triune life of God, an extraordinary adventure where together we discover how to live out of an abundance heretofore unimagined. The giving and receiving of God’s gracious abundance is not merely ‘spiritual’ but is in fact a material reality embodied in Israel and the church”. Hence, God’s generous welcome extended in Christ to all of humankind (in fact, to all of creation), needs to be abundantly embodied by the church.

Jean Vanier (1989:266) links the embodied practice of hospitality to vitality and abundant life: “Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we aren’t afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share”.

Mercy Oduyoye, referring to the thoughts of Rose-Zoe Obianga, offers the following definition, namely that hospitality is: “1) Welcoming/receiving, reception; 2) charity/ almsgiving; 3) boarding and lodging/ hotel, hospital; and 4) protecting/ sanctuary, integration, Receptions, hospices, hospitals, hotels and even integration, as in acquiring citizenship, have monetary price tags in our contemporary experience. But hospitality, as in African tradition, only hopes for reciprocity should the need arise” (2001:93).

And: “Openness vis-à-vis ‘the other’, however you define the ‘other’, is offering of hospitality” (2001:95).

The notion that authentic Christian hospitality is essentially a *lived reality*, will be explored in greater detail in chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Marginal bodies

In this chapter, it will be argued that authentic Christian hospitality cannot be embodied from the centre (of organisations, church management structures, even parachurch or missionary organisations), but that Christian hospitality is an event, an encounter, a possibility of the margins: a welcoming of the stranger that takes place from the margins, on the margins, for the margins. This event (in Caputo's sense, as referred to in chapter 2) is essentially a God-event with the intrinsic possibility of not only creating (and sustaining) community, but also of mirroring God in communion with Godself and with creation.

In terms of the situatedness of this study, the issue of marginality needs to be related back to sexuality. Therefore, I also point out that churches and institutionalised power structures are often marginalising forces. James Nelson (1992:16) says: "Organized religion has been, and in many ways still is, the major institution of ideological legitimization for sexual oppression in Western culture."²⁰

It will also be shown that in order to embody hospitality, a move from the core to the margins, to those who are oppressed by systems or ideologies, is needed, since hospitality is essentially a matter of access and is difficult (impossible?) to embody from the centre. If the movement from the centre to the margins is not undertaken, inclusion is not possible and the engagement can at most be called 'Christian outreach' or 'serving the

²⁰ James Nelson (1992:45) makes a very important link between body, theology and ethics: "(...) the body has theological and ethical relevance in a host of ways. And our bodily experience is always sexual. Such experience, obviously, is not always genital – actually, only infrequently so. Sexuality is far more than what we do with our genitals. It is our way of being in the world as bodyselves who are gendered biologically and socially, who have varying sexual orientations, who have the capacity for sensuousness, who have the need for intimacy, who have varied and often conflicting feelings about what it means to be bodied. It is all of this body experience that is foundational to our moral agency: our capacities for action and power, our abilities to tolerate ambiguity, our capacities for moral feeling. Our bodily experience significantly colors our interpretations of social relations, communities, and institutions which are the stuff of ethics."

other'. This move applies both to individuals and to organisations/ communities. For Christian hospitality to be embodied, it is necessary that bodies turn their inward gaze outward, seeking out who needs shelter, defence, safety, food and drink, and taking their bodies to the edge.

In conclusion, it will also be argued that Christianity loses its edge when it ceases to acknowledge (and celebrate) its own strangeness and assumes a position of power.

3.1 A brief introduction to anatheism

What kind of theological stance could possibly prove helpful in a discussion on the place of marginality in a broader discourse on Christian hospitality? Kearney (2010:71) applies the principle of marginality and its relation to hospitality in a radical way to religion, and more specifically Christian theism. Aligning himself with Paul Ricoeur's work, he suggests "a departure from the life-denying components of religion" so that "a genuine form of faith" can emerge in our secular culture. With regard to his positioning, Kearney writes (2010:xvi): "After the terrors of Verdun, after the traumas of the Holocaust, Hiroshima and the gulags, to speak of God is an insult unless we speak in a new way. (...) That is what I mean by a return to God *after* God. God must die so that God can be reborn".

Kearney, with his concept of anatheism, is arguing for a post-religious faith. For the purpose of this study, I will argue that his concept of anatheism (faith in God after Christian religion/ Christendom) is helpful as a theological stance in a discussion of the embodiment of Christian hospitality.

Hence Kearney not only suggests a literal engagement on the margins²¹, but a philosophical one, where commonly held beliefs (upheld by religion) can be challenged and purged in order to bring deeper understanding and an authentic (post-dogmatic) faith.

²¹ With reference to interreligious dialogue.

3.2 Margins of experience, life and religion

In popular culture, the margin is often called the ‘edge’. When referring to ‘the edge’, images of excitement, action, adventure and growth are conjured up. A reference to ‘living on the edge’ makes a particular reference to that place where the action is, where life is more in focus and where the one living there feels more alive.

But the margin is not only an action-packed place. The margin is a dangerous place, a lonely place, a threatening (and threatened) place. For this reasons, people on the margins are trouble-makers, they stir the pot and challenge the status quo. They ask difficult questions, disruptive questions, their ideas and bodies are perceived as foreign and can be too strange to welcome. They arrive with strange messages, laughable ones, ridiculously outrageous plans and prophecies.

Margins are also meeting places, battlegrounds where prejudice and compassion, theory and praxis and belief and growth meet. The margin is where decisions are made: who to notice, who to acknowledge, who to allow access to.²²

When Abraham welcomes the three strangers passing by his tent (narrated in Genesis 18), he does this from a marginal position. His tent is pitched at Mamre, a meeting place, a crossroads. Abraham acts hospitably, he caters generously, serves a huge meal and hence does more than is expected of him.

But his guests are not random strangers: they turn out to be messengers, bearing a strange message. Abraham and Sara will have a child, they say, and not even just one, but from them will be born a great nation. They are old, they respond. Sara is vocal in this, explaining in no uncertain terms that she is not even able to have pleasure with her

²² In the context of this thesis on Christian hospitality, this does not mean that those in the centre give access from a powerful position. This argument is based on the new humanity in Christ, where “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NIV).

husband anymore, let alone an actual child as a result. She ends up laughing at the ridiculously impossible message.

A meeting at the margins, eventually making the impossible possible.

The margin is a threshold, a liminal place. It is a place where change is possible and even very likely. In that sense, margins are vital spaces, growing spaces, life-giving and life-affirming, since they have the ability to grant access.

Kearney (2010:3) asks what happens in the decisive moment when the stranger appears:

The fact that inaugural moments of faith often begin with someone replying to an uninvited visitor – Abraham under the Mamre tree, Mary at the instant of annunciation, Muhammad in his cave – raises the question as to how religions respond to this advent of alterity in the midst of the human. By waging war or peace? By caring for the orphan, the widow and the stranger, or by hating and smiting one's enemies?

He continues to explain the purpose of his anatheistic project: “My wager throughout this volume is that it is only if one concedes that one knows virtually nothing about God that one can begin to recover the presence of holiness in the flesh of ordinary existence. Such holiness, I will suggest, was always already there – only we didn't see, touch or hear it” (2010:5). And he states:

This is what Jacob discovered after he wrestled with the stranger through the night, realizing at dawn that he had seen the face of God. It is what the disciples of Jesus discovered after they had walked with the stranger down the road to Emmaus before recognizing, retrospectively, after the breaking of the bread, that this wanderer was their risen rabbounai (John 20:16). And it is a lesson recorded by many great mystics who traversed the ‘dark night of the soul’ before discovering, like Teresa of Avila, that divinity dwells in the ‘pots and pans’. Anatheos. The return of God after the disappearance of God.

Kearney's invitation is not to a new orthodoxy, a new way of making traditional Christian dogma palatable or relevant in an emerging world, but a movement to what he calls the appreciation (my word) of the sacred-secular, of finding God in the sacred-secular.

With regard to the sacred-secular, he makes two noteworthy points: Firstly, that he has "been arguing for the introduction of the sacred into the secular, but this is a two-way process. The sacralization of the secular needs to be supplemented by the secularization of the sacred" (2010:139). Secondly, that "[t]he task is to reenvision the relationship between the holy and the profane in such a way that we can pass from theophany to praxis while avoiding the traps of theocracy and theodicy" (2010:139). He pleads for friendship between secularity and sacramentality, saying: "...secularity and sacramentality need not be adversaries" (2010:140).

Kearney (2010:140) then makes the link between atheism and the sacred-secular, pointing out that he does not propose a mere merging of the two: "This is not to say that the secular and the sacred are identical. The secular involves the human order of finite time, while the sacred denotes an order of infinity, otherness, and transcendence that promises to come and dwell in our midst – if we are willing to host it".

3.3 Bodies who speak from the margins

In order to enrich this conversation – one about Christian hospitality in an urban context – it is crucial to listen to many voices. It is even more important to listen to voices that speak from the margins. One such voice is that of Letty Russell²³. In her own words (2009:3):

²³ Russell (1929-2007) was a North American, Protestant, feminist theologian who lived and worked on the margins of the Christian church for most of her life. In her book *Just Hospitality* (2009), she refers to herself as a misfit, not sure whether she was an 'outsider within' or an 'insider without'. She found herself in a Euro-American, affluent, heteronormative, able-bodied and mostly male world for most of her professional life. During the first half of her life she described her sexual orientation as bisexual, and during

I am constantly on the move to find the margin and to claim it as the site of my theology of resistance. Theologians like myself make choices about moving from margin toward center, or from center toward margin, according to where we find ourselves in relation to the center of power and resources, and of cultural and linguistic dominance in any particular social structure.

Russell makes an important point in terms of our relation to power and social privilege (2009:3):

Our connection to the margin is always related to where we are standing in regard to social privilege, and from that particular position we have at least three choices. The first is to live where we are and refuse to challenge the social construction of our identity in terms of class, gender, sexuality or race. The second is to choose the margin and work for the empowerment of people who have been themselves marginalized by the dominant cultural, political, economic, religious or educational systems. The third choice is to identify with those in power in the center and to emulate the dominant group.

She also states (2009:13) that being on the margins (for whatever reason) can enable a deeper understanding of Christian hospitality; that “[b]eing a misfit allows us to understand the meaning of hospitality and honor difference from the side of the stranger”.

Kearney cites three examples of individuals (Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier and Mahatma Gandhi) who have enabled life-giving access to the marginalised by embodying radical hospitality, people who not only spoke about the inclusion of the marginalised, but who dared to embody a radically inclusive Christian hospitality. For the purpose of the argument that access is gained on the margins, I will briefly pause at Vanier’s ministry.

the second, while in a stable relationship with a woman, as lesbian. “Making sense of what ministry means for women and men within structures of oppression or marginality that are the result of racism, sexism, and classism has been one of my lifelong concerns” (2009:5), she states And: “My experience as an outsider within has also led me to embrace a ministry of hospitality” (2009:4).

According to Kearney (2010:159), Vanier's L'Arche communities²⁴ powerfully demonstrate the enabling (life-affirming) power of granting access to the estranged (disconnected): "In opening the gates of 'secure society' to the 'estranged', Vanier believes that we learn to grow by accepting not only the wounds of others but of ourselves. Exposing ourselves to insecurity, we are instructed by the strangers we set out to teach".

The implication of this concept is this: we (who deem ourselves 'normal') not only grow when we grant access to the disenfranchised/ disconnected (those we deem 'abnormal'); we truly grow when we are ministered to by them. We do not only grant access to them: they also grant access to us. Herein lies the mystery of God's life-affirming presence.

I would argue that Vanier's notion of radical community echoes with St Paul's metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, where each member has a place and all are inter-dependent.

L'Arche's (and Vanier's) particular embodiment of Christian hospitality puts a few questions on churches' ministry. Questions like: Who may be in ministry? Can people minister in the Christian church²⁵ and do it from the margins? Are persons who represent the dominant group in a community of faith more easily accepted as ministers or in leadership positions? The other implied question is: If a church glaringly lacks diversity (gender, race, status, physical ability, mental ability etc), is it a faithful representation of the body of Christ?

²⁴ Jean Vanier founded the L'Arche communities as an embodied expression of radical Christian hospitality. In the L'Arche communities, 'normal' and 'disabled' people share life and responsibilities.

²⁵ Here I am referring to people who are obviously marginal, like those who are physically disabled.

3.4 The margins (or strangeness) of the self

In order to make the actual embodiment of Christian hospitality possible, it is necessary to recollect one's own strangeness. This is a critically important step, since without taking it, we will deem ourselves 'normal', rendering the foreigners we encounter as 'the only ones who are strange', acting as powerful hosts, living under the false impression that we are God's gatekeepers, controlling the keys, able to dish out resources (food, clothing, shelter) and also guarding the ability to retract such favours.

The Polish philosopher Julia Kristeva (1991:1) starts her work, very appropriately titled *Strangers to ourselves*, as follows:

Foreigner: a choked up rage deep down in my throat, a black angel clouding transparency, opaque, unfathomable spur. The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group²⁶.

She continues (1991:1): "Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself"²⁷. And adds that "[t]he foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my

²⁶ Kristeva's words ring ironically true, given the European context in November 2015. Shortly after the terror attacks in Paris on 13 November in which at least 129 people were killed, a discourse on the presence of Syrian refugees in Europe and France, foreigners and French national values was uncovered. There have also been voices in the media and social media advocating a complete closure of France's borders, with specific reference to potential border-crossers from the Middle East.

²⁷ In the context of the Dutch Reformed Church's decisions on opening the fence to include gay clergy and to allow same sex unions, Kristeva's proposition – that we are strangers to ourselves – brings several questions to the fore, such as: Is a monogamous relationship (with or without mentioning the sexual act) between one woman and one man the only kind of intimate relationship that should not be deemed 'foreign'? Do the key-bearers (or those who think they are key-bearers) think that they are the ones who are 'normal'? If so, do they think they are the *only* ones who are normal? It has, sadly, been the case that one

difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (1991:1, emphasis added).

Kristeva is arguing that the foreigner is not foreign because he approaches us from the outside; a foreigner is foreign if he goes unrecognised, unnoticed, ignored and (perhaps due to sheer laziness) not allowed in. She holds that when we become conscious of our difference and acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, is it possible for the foreigner to come in.

Towards the end of her book, Kristeva (1991:192) concludes her reflection on what it means to be a foreigner as follows: “By recognizing *our* uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners” (author’s emphasis). And earlier on she states (1991:2-3):

But is it perhaps on the basis of (that) contemporary individualism’s subversion, beginning with the moment when the citizen-individual ceases to consider himself as unitary and glorious but discovers his incoherences and abyss, in short his ‘strangenesses’ – that the question rises again: no longer that of welcoming the foreigner within a system that obliterates him but of promoting the togetherness of those foreigners that we all recognize ourselves to be.

Kristeva argues that by doing this (recognising the foreigner within ourselves) we are able to offer an antidote to xenophobia, racism and other weapons employed against outsiders. The implication of this notion is that acceptance and community are made possible when the move is made from seeing oneself as ‘familiar’ and the other as ‘strange’.

aspect of the debate of the gay issue has concentrated on the theologically based argument that being gay is abnormal and a particular form of brokenness in need of redemption. This can clearly be called “natural theology”.

Jean Vanier (1989:99), speaking from the lived context of the l'Arche communities, explains what happens when people initially come to them to serve the needy and end up staying: "People come to l'Arche to serve the needy. They only stay if they have discovered that they themselves are needy²⁸, and that the good news is announced by Jesus to the poor, not to those who serve the poor".

Kristeva and Vanier – each in their unique voice, speaking from their contexts – therefore suggest that the event of hospitality is triggered by the acknowledgement of our own status, not as potential hosts, but as perpetual strangers. This admittance, this indispensable remembrance that we are all strangers and sojourners, sets the table where we may all gather as equals, both hosts and guests.

3.5 Serving from the margins, on the margins, to the marginalised, as the marginalised

Pohl (1999:106) describes how the vibrant practice of embodying Christian hospitality ironically takes place when the church itself is marginal: "The periods in church history when hospitality has been most vibrantly practiced have been times when the hosts were themselves marginal to the larger society".

When the Andrew Murray Congregation was founded in Johannesburg in 1966, it was a marginal community par excellence. It is nothing short of a miracle that it was formally part of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), presumably only tolerated because of the well-intended effort to reach out to 'speakers of other languages' (languages other than Afrikaans) by the founder, Dr Gert Swart.

By choosing to use English in meetings and worship services, access was granted, enabling a truly multi-cultural community of faith situated in Johannesburg with the conventional DRC fences (mainly upheld by the Afrikaans language, the National Party

²⁸ Or to use Kristeva's word, 'foreign', strangers to ourselves.

and white male dominance) demolished. The abovementioned access took on different forms. Diversity was not only welcomed but celebrated, with 46 language groups represented in the one congregation during the period 1973-1983²⁹.

The access gained by speaking English was not only enabling different cultural groups to feel at home in this marginal community, it was a non-bureaucratic meeting place (community) for people, openly declaring that people were needed here, that the body of Christ was not complete without diverse individuals joining and committing to service in God's kingdom. This meant (among other things) that (long before it was acceptable/fashionable), gay members were openly welcomed and embraced and not quietly tolerated on the congregation's fringe, being assigned to pre-determined roles as church organists by those closer to the centre of power. People were acknowledged as people, and people were welcomed as God's children in God's household.

During the period 1992–2005, Andrew Murray Congregation's vision was captured by a striking visual. It was a black-and-white photograph of a large aluminium saucepan, with a small group of clearly disabled people eating porridge (by using their hands) from the pan. On enquiry, the then pastor, Rev. Johann Symington, would explain that the photograph tells the story of all God's (differently abled) people, all being fed from the one source. This image spoke convincingly of a radically inclusive household, the household of God.

On presbyterial and synodical level, Andrew Murray Congregation was barely noticed, but graciously tolerated. It was left right where it started: on the margins. In official minutes of the Presbytery (Ring) of Johannesburg, Andrew Murray Congregation was patronisingly referred to as the 'adopted child' of the DRC, an undisputed reference to its marginalised status³⁰.

²⁹ This is according to the recollection of a member of the congregation since 1969, Mrs Joyce Kok.

³⁰ Taken from a "memorandum" of the Johannesburg DRC Presbytery after an extraordinary meeting of the presbytery held during April 1976 (ten years after the congregation's inception. The memorandum paints an ominous picture. Each congregation is discussed separately, except Andrew Murray. Point 4 of the

This ‘adopted child’ status proved to be a life-affirming place. The test for this lay not in numbers or in any measurable efficiency, but in a radical acceptance of all people, rooted in God’s grace towards humankind.

It can indeed be argued that Andrew Murray Congregation’s status (marginality) made it possible for them to extend a distinctive hospitality, that they saw their own status as being dependent on God (a small group gathered around the saucepan), that they did not shy away from society’s marginalised individuals and groups, and that they did this never forgetting their own vulnerability in the world.

It is also true that communities and churches oscillate between the centre and the margin, between comfort and growth, between huddling together and opening the circle. This, of course, is also true of Andrew Murray Congregation.

Pohl (1999:129) describes the underlying issue of the potentially strenuous situatedness of boundaries in a discourse on hospitality well, saying:

Boundaries are troublesome in the context of hospitality for a number of reasons. By definition, hospitality is gracious and generous. Limiting hospitality seems to undermine what is fundamental to the practice. But boundaries are also a problem because so many of them are hidden. While we are likely to notice the most obvious ones – for example, turning someone away or saying there is no room – we are unlikely to notice how even our own occupations, neighbourhoods and churches can, in themselves, create boundaries that shut out most strangers, especially needy ones.

memorandum reads as follows: “Indien bogenoemde ses gemeentes eindelijk almal die weg sal bewandel van aansluiting en eenwording, elk met sy betrokke moeder of dogter, sal dit beteken dat die Ring terugkeer na sy posisie in 1944 – dus 32 jaar gelede! In 1944 was daar slegs die gemeentes Johannesburg, Johannesburg-Oos, Jeppestown, Malvern en Johannesburg-Noord. Parkhust (sic) en Parksig sal dan die enigste oorlewende afstigtinge wees sedert 1944! (Andrew Murray is ‘n aangenome kind.)”.

3.6 Marginal to dominant norms

Pohl (1999:112) explains how founders (and by implication leaders) of contemporary communities³¹ who embody Christian hospitality deliberately embrace a position of marginality in relation to current societal norms: “Leaders in a number of these communities (...) have deliberately distanced themselves from the more privileged positions in society available to them and have chosen to place themselves on the margins of society”.

But it does not end there. Individuals and communities that extend radical hospitality in modern-day (often urban) contexts, live – intentionally – by a set of norms different to their dominant culture. Pohl (1999:112) again: “They explicitly distance themselves from contemporary emphases on efficiency, measurable results, and bureaucratic organisation. Their lives together are intentionally less individualistic, materialistic and task-driven than most in our society”.

This observation confronts us with a dilemma – or rather, a few dilemmas – in the urban context of Johannesburg. How do you distance yourself from the norms of individualism, materialism, self-sufficiency and measurable results that are so prevalent in urban societies? How do you even begin to embody an alternative set of values in a competitive, results-driven context? Is it possible for church communities to not fall prey to bureaucratic super-organisation?

By being marginal to current societal norms, Christian communities of hospitality clearly testify to the otherworldliness of God’s kingdom. Pohl (1999:112) describes how adopting an opposing set of values can give flesh to the gospel in a particular context:

In allying themselves with needy strangers, they come face-to-face with the limits of a ‘problem-solving’ or a ‘success’ orientation. In situations of severe disability, terminal illness or overwhelming need, the problem cannot necessarily be ‘solved’. But practitioners understand the crucial ministry of presence: it may not

³¹ Here she refers specifically to the Salvation Army.

fix a problem but it provides relationships which open up a new kind of healing and hope.

Pohl is alluding to relationships made possible by the new kinship in Christ. These relationships do not have ‘solutions’ or ‘success’ as goals, but rather life-affirming community and deep, authentic belonging. This is in contrast to practices where self-interest takes precedence over kenotic acts of service, following the example of Christ, making the kingdom of God manifest.

Caputo (2006:48) describes this distinctiveness: “The ‘kingdom of God’ is the contradiction of the ‘world’ (*cosmos*) which is the order of privilege and self-interest, of the business as usual of those who would prevent the event” (author’s emphasis).

3.7 Reclaiming the church’s marginality

Without an intentional move to the margins, churches/ faith communities run the risk of reinforcing the same, forfeiting growth and vitality. Familiarity may create security, but the aim of a theology of hospitality is not to promote sameness or to idealise the stability that orthodox theology so often aspires to. A theology of hospitality has an appetite for risk, for experience and difference.

Russell (2009:55) roots a theology of marginality (or theology for marginality) in the biblical narrative of the tower of Babel, explaining that:

God’s response to the tower builders’ pride and lust for power is, once more, to create the *gift of difference*! Differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, language, or culture are not problems to be resolved and controlled by a dominant group. Rather they are important ways of assuring that God’s gift of riotous diversity in all creation will continue. In fact, these differences are *gifts in themselves* (author’s emphasis).

Vanier (1989:51) echoes this sentiment when he points out that: “Too many communities form – or deform – their members to make them all alike, as if this were a good quality, based on self-denial”.

When proclaiming the ‘Kingdom of God’, the church should employ caution, since it may – if embodied, making an event possible – become a dangerous invocation. Caputo (2006:260) theorises: “The kingdom of God is not a mundane circle, assembly or club, and belonging to it is not a matter of membership in a worldly organisation but a way to respond to the event”.

Caputo (in Kearney and Semonovitch 2011:92) takes this notion to an even deeper level, arguing that “hospitality is hospitality to the event. Theology is hospitality to the event sheltered in the name of God”. In the context of this thesis, the ‘event’ is the possibility of entering into community, eventually being seated at a table where you are not only served a meal, but where your story is heard and you hear others’ stories. The goal is not to feast or even to share, the goal is to live and thrive in community.

In an urban context, this is not merely a matter of association and choice. It is far more complicated, since cities have the power (mainly economic) to make the opposite of community (isolation, disconnection, loneliness) possible and to sustain it. Refugees who seek shelter in cities are easily – almost by default – rendered powerless, as they are not able to qualify as consumers. It makes them the targets of severe exploitation and degradation.

In order to even just acknowledge the presence of the disconnected (those without community) in our midst, churches need to remember their own status in the world. We are not of this world (1 Peter), we too were once strangers, we are (still) not so much from here as it seems at first glance. We only know what we know, we do not know a refugee’s story or understand his/her thoughts and feelings. But we want to learn and engage by listening closely, freeing up seats at our tables in order to extend the proverbial festive table also known as the kingdom of God.

This embodied engagement on the margins is never an optional extra to the followers of Christ. Pohl (1999:105) underlines the intrinsic link between marginality and Christian hospitality, saying: “The Bible makes the experience of marginality normative for the people of God”. She continues: “For the Israelites and the early Christians, understanding themselves as aliens and sojourners was a reminder of their dependence on God. It provided a basis for gratitude and obedience”.

Kearney (2010:19) points out that to this day, the festival of sukkot serves to remind the Jewish people of their transitory status in the world: “The annual festival of Sukkot serves to remind the followers of Abraham that they are forever tent dwellers, strangers on the earth committed to the hosting³² of strangers”.

Both Kearney and Pohl draw our attention to our identity in the world. They remind us that we can (and should) embody a welcome that is borne from our own temporal, marginal status in the world.

Pohl (1999:157) explains how an understanding of the church as God’s household – a safe place in a hostile world – can shape our expressions of hospitality: “More than anywhere else, when we gather as church our practice of hospitality should reflect God’s gracious welcome”. She adds an important provision: “In the church (...) it is not our table to which we welcome people; it is God’s table to which we come as equals” (1999:158).

This positioning by Pohl has important implications for both theology and ecclesial practice. It raises questions about whose welcome is extended, how it is communicated and what kind of access is granted (or denied) and to whom.

³² The English word ‘host’ has its origins in the Latin *hospes* (host) and *hospit* (guest). In the context of and argument for the embodiment of Christian hospitality, the duality locked up in the origins of the word is meaningful.

I am thinking of a recent request by a differently abled member of our congregation, someone with cerebral palsy and severe spasticity. Being wheelchair-bound and wholly dependent on others for getting around, he asked for a ramp to be built, linking the seating area of the church building with the liturgical space. To him, this was not a matter of political correctness or even comfort, but a symbolic and philosophical means of gaining access and going to where he has rarely been before. In the liminal space between the seating area and the liturgical space (that only ‘normal’ people could access before), a joyous, divine moment of sitting at the Lord’s table was in the making.

3.8 Finding God on the margins: Daring to embrace a theology of hospitality

Caputo (in Kearney and Semonovitch 2011:83) convincingly makes a case for the utter unpredictability we face when we are being hospitable. To Caputo, being hospitable is indeed about welcoming the stranger, but the moment the (capitalised) Stranger is welcomed, we invoke trouble: “We are called upon to make room for God, to welcome God, to receive God, and then to keep our fingers crossed. We know this name will drive us mad, with justice or violence, with compassion or rage, either way, trouble”.

Caputo (2011:87) is advocating in favour of an openness to God on the other side of the margin: that place where explanation, logic and predictability cease to exist. By referring to Meister Eckhart, Caputo suggests a departure from familiar notions of God in order to welcome God again:

Meister Eckhart famously said, I pray God to rid me of God, meaning I pray the God who can never be mastered and domesticated to rid me of the God whom I think I have in my sights, under control. I pray the God whose coming is always the coming of the stranger to rid me of the God who serves to keep guard over the circle of the same (year: page).

Caputo offers a critique of orthodox theology and the resulting mindset of intellectual control of words about God, the character of God and the work of God, having the unexpected result of a false sense of human control and unchallenged power bases. He

does this by suggesting a radical departure from any preconceived notions about God, to the degree that he depersonalises God and suggests that God *is* not (being, supreme being, ground of being, source of being) except for (the possibility of) an event.

Caputo (2006:2) grounds his ‘theology of the event’ in the suggestion that the name of God harbours an event and that theology’s task is “to release what is happening in that name, to set it free, to give it its own head, and thereby to head off the forces that would prevent this event”.

In the context of this thesis on Christian hospitality, one can now be tempted to ask, or attempt to apply, Caputo’s suggestion: “Release from what?”, “Set what (or whom) free?”, “Which forces can prevent the advent (or welcoming) of the stranger?”

Caputo (2006:7) offers additional thoughts on this proposed project, the departure from a complacent orthodox theology and move towards a theology of hospitality: “This theology of the event lacks corpulent articles of faith, a national or international headquarters, a well-fed college of cardinals to keep it on the straight and narrow, or even a decent hymnal. Think of it as ‘theology without theology’”.

He clearly argues for de-centralisation and de-colonisation of theology: for a liberation of people’s impositions (and claims on) the name, character, words and work of God³³. He makes a case for a ‘weak theology’ (his term), including in his argument the thoughts of Derrida, Vattimo and Benjamin, but also those of St Paul, who explicated the good news of the cross of Jesus as the ‘weakness of God’ (1 Cor. 1:25).

³³ The 2015 General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church is a case in point. This is a context (albeit a temporary one) where a dominant group, (the colonisers) consisting of white, Afrikaans-speaking, heterosexual men engage in discussions about the Word of God. Although strikingly similar in one sense (demographically speaking), they represent a diversity of opinion and are not all combatant colonisers. Some dare to venture towards the breath-taking waterfall of uncertainty, not sure how wide and high the love of God can be and in perpetual awe of it, while others have built banal blockhouses in order to enforce, validate and protect the truth and the infallibility of the Bible.

But he takes it a step further (2006:7–8) by pointing out that theology has become a self-contradicting effort, essentially confusing itself:

I am suggesting that theology is a house divided against itself and that it lacks self-understanding to the point that it is intellectually bipolar, vascillating wildly between the heights of power and the depths of weakness. It is, on the one hand, the locus of the most divine discourses on the weakness of God, even as, on the other hand, it is too much in love with power, constantly selling its body to the interests of power, constantly sitting down to table with power in a discouraging contradiction of its own good news.

Caputo continues to build a case for a ‘weak’ theology, a marginal theology, a theology for the marginalised, based on God’s (and the Kingdom of God’s) preferential seating of the lowly, the poor, the outcasts. In his own words (2006:46):

God chose the ‘outsiders’, the people deprived of power, wealth, education, high birth, high culture. Theirs is a ‘royalty’ of outcasts, so that (...) the word ‘kingdom’ is used ironically, almost mockingly, to refer to those pockets of the despised that infect and infest the world. For this is a kingdom of the low-down and lowborn, the ‘excluded’, the very people who are precisely the victims of the world’s power.

The link between the kingdom of God and the disconnected (those in need of embodied Christian hospitality) is now becoming clear: the kingdom (in the ironic sense of the word) is not for those at the top, but a special invitation to and inclusion of those at the bottom, a welcoming of those on the margins. It is not an opportunity to gain access to power, but an invocation on the fringe, to those on the fringe, to events and life made possible in community, in interdependence and sharing and communion.

One implication of Caputo’s theology of the event is that there needs to be a departure from power. But how does this come about? He diagnoses the condition of theology’s bipolarity (mentioned earlier) as follows: “This bipolarity is a function of the distinction between name and event. For the name belongs to the world and can gather worldly

prestige, which is why it can be taken to be a strong force; whereas the event belongs to the order that disturbs the world with the possibilities of being otherwise, and this by means of its weak and unconditional force” (2006:8).

To this reader, Caputo argues against theologies of naming, control and security in favour of a theology of welcoming the event, welcoming what is not yet, welcoming possibility, welcoming hospitality.

By arguing for a theology of the event (rather than a theology of the name), Caputo lays the table for events and encounters made possible by people who seek to embody Christian hospitality. This in itself marks a departure from power, since turning our gaze to an event (rather than gazing into the distance, contemplating a name, new words or the formulation of sound doctrine) is akin to surrendering control. It is this unpredictability, even danger, that Caputo is alluding to when he seeks to promote a distinction between name and event.

Based on Caputo’s thought, I would argue that Christian hospitality is in itself an event. As love cannot be theorised about or (only) expressed in words, so too can hospitality not be talked about; it needs to be embodied by real people in real places in real ways.

Caputo (2006:8) again: “A name can accumulate an army of institutional power, semantic prestige and cultural authority. But the event is not a natural thing, not a part of natural language; it is more like a ghost, the specter of a possibility”. In this sense, a theology that has departed from power, prestige and authority is more likely to play host to the event of hosting the stranger and possibly welcoming God.

Engaging the work³⁴ of Catherine Keller, Caputo (2006:65) alludes to the effect of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ approaches when doing theology and in doing so offers a possible explanation of the differences between an orthodox theology and a theology of

³⁴ Described by Caputo as an attempt to counter ‘tehomophobia’ – “a fear of the deep, of the monsters of the deep, a fear of the flux – in all its forms” (2006:63).

hospitality. According to Caputo (2006:65), Keller rewrites the creation narratives³⁵ with a feminine imagination. The implication of this is a theological-hermeneutical approach that attempts to strike a balance between ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ theology.

Referring to Keller’s work, Caputo (2006:65) explains:

Men just cannot tolerate the thought of their aquatic origin, of floating around helplessly in a sea of utter uterine dependence, so they have tried to shake it off and purge the official record, utterly effacing this uterine beginning. Strong theology has from old worked with the model of father generating sons, of generation by a father without a mother, or by divine fathers with merely human mothers, and with fathers almighty with as little input from the material/ maternal side as possible, so that where the Genesis narratives speak of something, a wild or a watery deep, onto-phallo-theology reads ‘nothing’, leaving a big erect masculine will to do it all by himself.

Hence, it makes sense that strong, orthodox theologies dominated by men (or masculine fear as undercurrent) would strive to affirm certainty, predictability, order, structure and security. These theologies show a preference for the stability of the land (as opposed to the wildness of the sea), creating immovable maps in order to smooth out navigational challenges.

Caputo (2006:87) thus makes a case for a weak theology, with the ‘weak force of God’ at its heart. To Caputo, the might of God does not lie in God’s omnipotence or even the notion of God as Ultimate Being, but in the strange power of the name of God: “The name of God is powerful because it is the name of our hope in the contract Elohim makes

³⁵ Where the ‘message’ would be that God Almighty created order out of chaos. According to this reading of the creation narrative, God’s aim was to eliminate chaos and to create a degree of predictability, making life less uncertain. I would dare to say that this reading is based on male chauvinism and heteronormativity, undertaken by ‘strong’ men in order to offer assurance to ‘powerful’ men that they will not succumb to the forces of chaos and unpredictability.

with things when he calls them ‘good’, when he calls them to the good, when he breathes the life of the good over them” (2006:87).

He continues: “The name of God, we have maintained, is the name of an event, not an entity; the name of something unconditional, the object and the subject of unconditional love and unconditional hope, which concerns us absolutely” (Caputo 2006:88).

Yes, it concerns us absolutely, since in the biblical narratives on hospitality, welcoming the stranger is not another law or cumbersome obligation, but an event, a divine event, an occasion for and of revelation. In Genesis 18, the transition from a human to a divine guest seems starkly seamless. In Emmaus, the revelation happens with the event of breaking the bread, in Hebrews 13:2 the children of God are encouraged to welcome strangers, since the possibility exists that the same may happen: that God may be present in the event of the stranger being entertained.

This is what I choose as theological starting point for the discourse on the embodiment of Christian hospitality in an urban context: a weak theology, a vulnerable theology, less concerned with the naming of God but radically open to the event harboured in the name of God, discerningly welcoming the stranger, daring to move from being scared of strangers to seeing *mere* guests as *sacred* guests, embracing them as possible divine hosts in time to come.

But this is a dangerous enterprise. We are forewarned by Caputo. This is a serious matter, because it is a wild and unpredictable undertaking.

We are entering the presence of possibility.

Chapter 4: Bodily proximity

In this chapter, it will be argued that an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality needs to take into account the presence (or location) of bodies. We enter into the possibility of the event of hospitality not from a distance or via impersonal correspondence, but closely, with flesh and bones, with emotions and stories and baggage and dreams.

The discussion of bodies (and the need for the proximity to the stranger) is connected theologically to the biblical notion of the body of Christ, a notion often understood in reference to the church as well as in conjunction with the celebration of the Eucharist. Reading, amongst others, the work by Newman, a case will be made for the embodiment of Christian hospitality that is extended from worship³⁶, including the celebration of the Eucharist, to the broader household of God. I will make a case for the continued interconnectedness between worship, Eucharist and (embodied) hospitality.

In conclusion, this chapter will briefly tell the story of a particular embodiment of Christian hospitality in an urban context and ask whether this is a helpful model for practising Christian hospitality.

4.1 Where the body can be

I can only speak from where I stand. But where my body has been is also influencing how I stand. I was born in 1973 to Afrikaans-speaking parents. At home, we spoke Afrikaans, I was schooled in Afrikaans and worshipped in Afrikaans. I grew up in various congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church, where everyone spoke Afrikaans. The people who went to church with us were people like us: families, consisting of one father

³⁶ Worship has become a heavy-laden, almost ideological word. In charismatic circles, ‘worship’ refers to a style of music and prayer. It is often used to distinguish between traditional/ conventional music and prayer and contemporary church music and more spontaneous prayer. Newman uses the word in the more conventional sense of the word. She refers to the gatherings of God’s people, centring around the Eucharist.

and one mother and one or more children. They were classified as ‘white’ and lived (at least viewed from the outside) similar-looking lives.

In this world, sameness was upheld as a God-ordained virtue. Examples of how this was rolled out in Afrikanerdom abound, all centring around an imminent threat in the form of the other and the unknown. These others had various names and guises at different stages and times: ranging from the *Roomse Gevaar*³⁷ to the *Rooi Gevaar*³⁸ and the *Swart Gevaar*³⁹.

Now and again – also due to growing up – I would become aware of a deviance: a single parent as a result of death or a divorce. Or somebody who was fluent in another language, or who had travelled and had an arty side to her/him.

Because of my father’s job, that of a bank manager, we were from time to time invited to some of his clients’ homes for supper. A particularly foreign group invited us again and again. They were Indian people, living on the margins of the white communities we found ourselves in during the 1980s.

At the Indian people’s homes, we ate samoosas and curries cooked to our conservative tongues’ liking. I quietly admired my father’s receptivity to what I would later be able to identify as heartfelt hospitality.

After these outings, in reflecting on such evenings out, my parents would always carry on about the beauty of the evening, about how much they enjoyed themselves, how good the food was and how welcoming and relaxed the mood. Now and again my mother would complain about something that was too hot for her liking, but in general we left our hosts’ homes with warmed hearts.

³⁷ Literally: Roman (Catholic) Threat.

³⁸ Literally: Red Threat, referring to Communism, related to the struggle against apartheid.

³⁹ Literally: Black Threat, once again referring to the black struggle for liberation.

My parents never reciprocated by inviting them to our house. This was during the height of apartheid.

In my Standard 7 (grade 9) year, 1988, our Afrikaans teacher called me aside and suggested that I start reading the works by the Afrikaans author Andre P. Brink. I did what I was told and this proved to be a kind of a conversion.

I read wonderful things, disturbing things, challenging things. I learnt about fabulously foreign places like Paris, about sex and other forbidden fruits, and about the security police and how the Afrikaner nationalist project⁴⁰ was all about keeping to the same and protecting ourselves from all things strange and potentially threatening. For what, I later thought.

Strangely, interestingly, some of the things I had learnt at church, like the fact that God loved people so much that He sent his only begotten son, started speaking to the mindset I found myself in. It challenged white Afrikaner male superiority, but this was appeased by the comfort of knowing that I was privileged (or so I thought) simply because I was male and white and part of an established establishment.

I eventually finished school in the southern part of Pretoria in 1991, the last year that government schools were allowed to be separated along racial lines.

At the end of our first year at university, I was invited by two fellow students to undertake a trip to Israel to go and work at a kibbutz and travel briefly afterwards. There, in Israel, I had my first taste of what it feels like to be a foreigner.

Our three-week stay in Jerusalem was in the living room of an Armenian youth hostel owner's mother. On Christmas morning 1992, we were woken by the nurturing Armenian woman, serving hot mugs of very sweet tea to three forlorn foreigners.

⁴⁰ Supported and God-ordained by the backing from the Dutch Reformed Church's biblical condoning of apartheid.

In many ways, feeling perpetually ‘lost’ in Israel, sensitised me to my more fundamental status of foreigner in the world. In order to make this discovery, my body had to be transported roughly 8 000 kilometres to a completely new world.

Reflecting on this 1992 trip now, attempting to formulate an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality in urban contexts, I am still trying to understand the relations between identity and culture, between belonging to one group and being exposed to another, between finding safety in a particular identity and welcoming other identities.

I now understand that the transforming event, the revelatory experience lay not only in the kindness of the sweet, hot tea and the Armenian lady’s warm heart, but in being exposed to other people, in departing from the familiar and in gaining a sense of what it means to be a foreigner in a foreign place.

Perhaps more was shaped in me by church and church activities and worship and theology and the shared – or un-shared – Eucharist than I care to realise.

It may well be that all those tedious rituals in church and the gathering at the table and the shared meals and the Holy Communion lay foundations for being sent, for being taken to new places and new people.

4.2 Who the broken body can be close to

Newman (2007:147) argues that worship is hospitality. She states: “...when we gather to worship, we participate most fully in the triune hospitality of God. Perhaps nowhere is this more visibly apparent than when we gather around the table of the Lord, feasting upon the self-giving of the Son in the body and blood united with Christ to become his body for the world”.

She adds: “I wish not to look at the relation between hospitality and the Lord’s Supper, but rather to approach the Lord’s Supper as an *intensification* of our participation in divine hospitality” (2007:147, author’s emphasis).

Newman (2007:149) intensifies her argument as follows: “...the Eucharist does not simply motivate Christians to practice hospitality; rather, it is our participation in God’s hospitality, as through this celebration *we are enabled to become eucharistic*, extending God’s offering and gift to the world” (emphasis added).

But, like the confidence-lacking Moses or the doubting Thomas, we may prevent ourselves to being God’s offerings and gifts to the world with many excuses, comfortably claiming weakness, blaming the inability of the flesh to extend a welcome or serve the hungry. We may indeed prefer to hand out goods and food rather than being given ourselves.

John Caputo (2011:95) makes a case for the fearless inclusion of the weakness of the flesh in the embodiment of Christian hospitality, stating: “The weaknesses of the flesh intensify life, raising its pitch to the limits”. He explains (2011:95):

That is why it makes perfect sense to speak of a ‘disabled God’ (Eiesland and Fletcher), or a ‘mortal God’ (Derrida), of the ‘body of God’ (McFague), or of a ‘suffering God’ (Bonhoeffer), or even of the God of ‘indecent theology’ (Althaus-Reid). Difficulty, disability, indecency, disease and death itself are features of life, part of the way the multiple forms of life are etched, and not a lasting punishment for a fateful exercise of bad judgment in Eden.

With this perspective, Caputo directly challenges the idea of a strong – physically strong – ‘orthodox theology’: “Orthodox theology is in search of the grounds of our hope, and so it should be, so are we all, but it will not grant that these grounds are groundless grounds, that the world does not rest on something firm and transparent, some unmixed and risk free source, and to that extent it does not rest at all” (2011:95).

He continues (2011:95):

Orthodoxy is the orthopaedics of thought, which wants to straighten the limbs of thought. Orthodoxy is inhospitable to the stranger. It is afraid of the strange alterity of the disabled, of the different, afraid of monsters and of monstrous showings whose monstrosity is mainly a matter of looking different. Orthodoxy promises boundaries that will insure that everything within will be right and upright, safe and straight, happy and good. It will not concede the restlessness in things, that the world offers us multiple chances but few guarantees, that a fully grounded hope is not hope, just good investment.

Just as Christ could not separate his body and his mission, so too can followers of Christ not separate our bodies and our calling. We are our bodies, but we are also the body of Christ, broken and given to the world. At the Lord's table, our bodies are made hospitable. We cannot be hospitable without our bodies, or without supple minds and hearts. But before our bodies can become hospitable to the other, we need to overcome a few fears.

4.3 Overcoming fear of proximity

My earliest childhood memories of Holy Communion in the DRC all centre around being prepared to receive Communion. Up until the early 1980s, it was customary to have a 'Preparation Service' on the Saturday before Holy Communion. This had a very clear goal: to get you ready to receive the gifts of bread and wine; to make sure that you were deserving of participation in the meal. The main way through which this preparation was achieved was to make sure that you had no unconfessed sin, that you were in the right with God and therefore ready to receive the body and blood of Christ.

This custom was intrinsically linked to the fear of God's judgment. The better you were prepared, the lower the chances of being judged/ admonished by an angry God. The main focus, therefore, was sin. My sin, God's forgiveness of my sin and the price Jesus had to

pay to atone for my sin. The aim? To leave the building assured of salvation. My salvation.

From time to time, I would become aware of some people not taking part in Holy Communion. My observations led me to the conclusion that they were not ready, that they had unfinished business or unresolved conflict, either with themselves or with others in the community. Worst case: they had committed a sin. This was enough reason to not take part in Communion, for exclusion, based on the fear of God's judgment.

If Newman is to be taken seriously, the Eucharist has another purpose, that of intensifying our participation in God's hospitality. This is a participation based on undeserved grace and favour and not on our own readiness to receive individual salvation. When viewed in this light, the Eucharist becomes not only a receiving, but also a giving. When I leave the table, I leave not as a mere recipient, but as being given myself.

But this does not happen in isolation, or for the individual separate to the community. We are received at God's table as guests-in-community and we are sent from God's table as hosts-in-community (or as guest who have become hosts and hosts that have become guests). However, being a host in an urban context is not a simple matter. If I become hospitable by virtue of having received the body and blood of Christ, I may face a whole new set of fears when I dare to welcome the stranger.

My guest may be a criminal, a liar, an outright con artist, someone who is not in need but who is out to exploit, deceive and even murder. These fears might necessitate the need to establish security. As an embodiment of our fears, as safeguard against uncertainty and the potential *dangerous* strangeness of the other, we put up fences.

For this reason, the decision to include or welcome beckons the practice of discernment. When confronted with the stranger, we need to distinguish between warranted and unwarranted fear. We do this better when we discern as community. I will return to this

notion, namely the role and value of a discerning community a bit later, arguing that discernment is a gift given to help us cope with the complexities when faced with the stranger in urban contexts.

4.4 Eucharist shared with whom?

Newman draws on the imagery of the 16th century mystic Teresa of Avila, who stated that we are castles with God living at the centre, and that the spiritual journey is one of moving through the different rooms, “allowing God to draw us more fully into communion with him” (2007:148).

But Newman also chooses to apply the metaphor of the castle to the church. Quoting 1 Peter 2:4-6 and Ephesians 2:22, she argues that Christians do not have a house, but that we are a journeying house: “Teresa’s vivid imagery gives us a helpful way to think about what kind of house this is: expansive, beautiful, the very dwelling place of the triune God. At the same time, this ‘dwelling’ requires pilgrimage, since Christians are at home in no nation” (2007:148).

This notion engages the ‘problem’ stated in chapter 2: that a complacent “orthodox” theology is in fact not a journeying theology. It may still be a house, but it is a static house, a fenced house, keeping close control over who is in and who is out and, by implication, not very spacious⁴¹. It is another question whether this is a reforming and hospitable theology at all.

⁴¹ 2015 has proven to be a landmark year for society’s views on same-sex relationships. Not only was it the year when the American Supreme Court passed the ruling that same-sex marriage be legitimised in all US states, but it was also the year when the Dutch Reformed Church opted for a more spacious dwelling at its General Synod held in October. Since the latter made the decision to allow their clergy to officiate at same-sex unions with the permission/ clearance of their church councils, some rather unsettling divisions are becoming apparent. It can certainly be summarised as follows: some have chosen for a more spacious dwelling without a fence (that keeps gay believers out), based on the conviction that people who are attracted to the same sex should be allowed a space in which to commit, while others want to keep this

Kearney alludes to the same movement – from an orthodox theology to a theology of hospitality – when he refers to the life and work of Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement⁴² (2010:157):

Through kenosis (...) God ceases to be some omnipotent Patriarchal Cause over and above humanity and takes the form of a Loving Gift that empties itself in and as the Son of Man who in turn empties himself out of love for the least of human beings. As though God as Master must pass away so that God as servant may be born – a servant who in turn passes away so that humans may be reborn in his ‘image and likeness’.

Kearney also points out that Dorothy Day’s life is an example of the eucharistic practice by *living with the poor*, transfiguring the world through grace.

Day’s choice to share her presence with the marginalised and not only serve the marginalised, is often viewed as an exemplary embodiment of Christ’s kenosis. This is love in action, the ‘church’ being willing to travel/ move to where the marginalised live and dwell with them, albeit temporarily.

Kearney again: “The message here, so robustly witnessed by Day, is that just as the Son hosts the Father on earth so too we may host the Son in every act of care toward the ‘least of these’. Kenotic descent from Father and Son to humanity invites a return journey whereby humans may ascend and flourish through eucharistic hospitality” (2010:157). At the table of the Eucharistic feast, the body of Christ is given. When we depart from the table, we become the given.

particular fence, based on their judgment that a) being gay is a sin and b) gay sex is unnatural and therefore against the will of God.

⁴² The Catholic Worker Movement was founded in 1933 during the Great Depression by Dorothy Day. It is best known for houses of hospitality located in run-down sections of many cities, though a number of Catholic Worker centres exist in rural areas. Food, clothing, shelter and welcome are extended by unpaid volunteers to those in need, according to the ability of each household.

Newman (2007:141) echoes this view of communion/ Holy Communion, implying that what happens in community and at the Lord's Table does not only rationally (or ritually) affirm our identity as followers of Christ, but that it is also identity-forming, stating:

That we are created for communion with God and others means that we are part of a tradition in which we are dependent on others (including those not explicitly within our tradition) to demonstrate to us what we are to be. Such a politics does not depend on individualism but rather on *friendship*. It depends less on the language of rights and more on the language of *gift*. In fact, education made possible by friendship can be described as *the circulation of gift*, which is also a way to describe hospitality” (author's emphasis).

Hence, we not only learn (with our minds) when we receive Holy Communion, we learn (with our bodies and senses) who we should be when we acknowledge our dependence on others, circulating gifts in mutual exchanges, with the emphasis on mutuality in community.

Newman moreover expands her emphasis on the Eucharist as both receiving and giving by pointing out the element of playfulness. Referring to God's excess, she argues that humans are invited to display and participate in God's excess: “Our aim is not simply to get something out of the service, but to participate – playfully and joyfully – in what God is doing in our midst with these particular people whom God has gathered” (2007:159). She adds: “Understood in this light, the Lord's Supper is not so much about mental apprehension as about our participation in a cosmic drama much larger than ourselves or our individual thoughts – a participation we rightly call a celebration” (2007:159).

By putting this emphasis on the element of playfulness, Newman is (like Caputo) critiquing what she calls orthodox theology⁴³, where the latter – unintentionally, perhaps – seeks to retain control and runs the risk of being perceived as sanitised and clinical.

⁴³ Newman, in a discussion of orthodoxy vs. pluralism, makes the point that higher education should recognise its own ability to merely substitute one form of orthodoxy with another, amounting to indoctrination: “In matters of education, the question is not whether or not to ‘impose’ orthodoxy but what

Following on Newman's thoughts on the Eucharist, a few critical questions arise:

- In the conventional church service where Holy Communion is served, who is present? Members? Members plus a few visitors? Are any persons who live on the margins of society present? If they were, would they feel welcome?
- What are the 'requirements' for attending?
- Does the format/ eucharistic liturgy speak of the reconciliation between God's people, or is the facilitated experience a highly individualistic event?
- Are there any distinguishable symbols/ gestures that indicate mutuality and/or community, e.g., is the minister 'in control' or is he/she deliberately part of the sharing in the household of God gathered at the table?
- Lastly, and importantly, what are the (theological) beliefs behind our style of hosting the Eucharist?

These are all questions pertaining to proximity, to where the Body of Christ is, to who feels welcomed by the body of Christ, to where it's taken to, who it's given to, and who has access. These are important questions that asks our careful attention when we seek to discern and determine what is good.

kind of orthodoxy we are in fact promoting" (2007:130). And: "Doesn't pluralism allow for dialogue, respect, and multiple voices? It does (and this is a potential good), but pluralism has absolutely no way to discern between the true, the good, and the beautiful and the false, the bad, and the ugly" (2007:130).

4.5 Proximity: Challenging ‘norms’

A few months ago, I was approached by a photographic artist and asked to write a short passage about the Christian view on family for a new book he was busy publishing. But the brief was not as simple as it may sound. The book’s proposed title, ‘The Modern Family Portrait’⁴⁴, hinted towards alternative families, unconventional families, ‘modern’ families.

In order to give me a glimpse of his content, the artist sent me a few of his family portraits, with background on each. One family consisted of a Jewish mother with twin boys, the twins conceived via in vitro fertilisation, by means of a sperm donor. Another photograph portrayed a middle-aged mother with her grown daughter, the latter clearly looking angry, since the mother had just recently announced her attraction to other women and subsequent decision to divorce her husband (the father of the girl in the photo) and move in with a new female partner. This scenario was continued in several striking photographs, each telling a unique story.

So when choosing what to write from my perspective as minister to an urban Christian congregation, I chose to write about what ‘normal’ is and how the church is often seen as self-appointed judge of what ‘normal’ is and should be, while we should perhaps rather busy ourselves with norms: wholesome values like trust and openness and acceptance and faithfulness in intimate relationships.

Referring to the role of the Christian community in providing ethical and normative guidance, Jeremy Punt (2013) explains as follows: “Claims that the Bible unambiguously condemns homosexuality derive more from entrenched heteronormative and homophobic positions than from responsible engagement with biblical texts.”

⁴⁴ As yet unpublished.

Punt is emphasising that while Christian communities may be under the impression that they are conveying the ‘will of God’⁴⁵ or providing ethical guidance on matters pertaining to intimate relationships, they may just be busy with reinforcing heteronormativity and homophobia.

The reason for mentioning this here is as follows: When we are not challenged by the proximity of the other (those who are different), our perceptions of ‘them’ will remain unchallenged and our behaviour and theology orthodox and inhospitable, essentially unwelcoming towards the stranger, stuck in one narrow idea of what is normal. In the words of Elizabeth Newman (2007:177): “Hospitality, faithfully practiced, challenges our assumptions of what it means to be normal”.

Newman is underlining the issue of exposure. When we are not exposed to the other, the other is simply reinforced as the stranger, as the unknowable, the unfamiliar. Being exposed to others is, in Christian terms, an issue of proximity, imitating the kenotic movement of Christ. When we come in touch with the other, we change⁴⁶. We also cease to think of ourselves as the only normal ones.

At the Andrew Murray Congregation, our notions of ‘normality’ are continuously challenged by a certain member, whom I briefly referred to earlier. He has severe cerebral palsy, to the degree that it is thought by most that he cannot do anything by or for himself. His limbs are spastic to such a degree that they are completely static. He is

⁴⁵ Hans Küng (1974:251) offers an enlightening definition of the will of God: “From the first to the last page of the Bible, it is clear that God’s will aims at man’s well-being at all levels, aims at his definitive and comprehensive good: in biblical terms, at the salvation of man and of men. God’s will is a helpful, healing, liberating, saving will. God wills life, joy, freedom, peace, salvation, the final, great happiness of man: both of the individual and of mankind as a whole. This is the meaning of God’s absolute future, his victory, his kingdom, which Jesus proclaims: man’s total liberation, salvation, satisfaction, bliss.”

⁴⁶ Certain voices within the DRC have campaigned for quite some time that the church stops talking about gay members and clergy, but rather include them in conversations. The intention behind this gesture is to be exposed to the presence of the (unfamiliar) other. It is an attempt to be in touch.

dependent on the assistance of his full-time carer for doing many things. But not for everything.

With the help of his engineer brothers, a headset has been devised, enabling him to use an iPad. By drawing on the iPad with a customised stylus, he is able to create artworks. He is also very active on social media, manages the church's Facebook group and does his own banking, also by means of the iPad. He also takes part in a sport called 'boccia'⁴⁷, in which he has earned provincial colours.

His self-understanding is that he is 'differently abled'. At first glance, this simply sounds like a superficial semantic adjustment of the term 'disabled', but this is not the case. By using the term 'differently abled', the playing field is levelled, since all human beings are differently abled. Julius van der Wat sees himself as normal and is inviting others to see him similarly.⁴⁸

But Julius has not always been part of a community where he was welcomed and not avoided, where he was unconditionally accepted and given a purpose in the body of Christ. Like many other physically handicapped people⁴⁹, he has been at the receiving end of emotional traumatising in the form of efforts to cure him. These efforts have mostly taken the form of exposure to Christian healing ministries: people believing that it is 'not God's will' that Julius is spastic, hence not functioning fully, not flourishing and in need of physical healing.

⁴⁷ Boccia is a sport which is based on the same principle as bowls, where the objective is to roll biased balls so that they stop close to a smaller ball called a "jack" or "kitty".

⁴⁸ Tom Reynolds (2013:17) has the following to say about disability: "Disability unsettles easy assurances. It exemplifies how people can be represented in terms that exclude. Disability often signifies the way that some people are recognized as lacking something basic to what is understood as human, being abnormal, a body gone wrong." Juliana Claassens (2013:55) also writes about the typecasting differently abled people face: "(...) perhaps one of the most harmful stereotypes is the numerous examples that portray disability in terms of monsters, evil or punishment." In other words, something to be abhorred.

⁴⁹ I deliberately use the term here, in order to make the distinction between so-called 'able-bodied' people and so-called 'disabled' people.

The prized physical healing would take place through the power of prayer. These prayers typically have two components: that of the one praying and that of the one being prayed over. In this frame of mind, healing depends on the size (or extent) of the faith, which would make the prayers more powerful and hence more effective. When these prayers – in the context of Christian healing ministries – are not answered and the person not healed, blame is usually put on the ‘lack of faith’, either of the one praying or of the one being prayed for.

God has not answered these prayers and the efforts to cure Julius of cerebral palsy and make his broken body a ‘normal’ one have been in vain. He is also one of the most healthy⁵⁰ and psychologically sound people I know, with a living, life-giving faith, living a normal life while encouraging others to fearlessly do the same.

Robert Vosloo (2006a) writes that “...society is fascinated with the body, or more precisely, with the perfect body. One reason for this may be connected to the perceived underestimation of the body in certain cultures and religions”. One may indeed ask whether Christian theologies and spiritualities have an adequate appreciation of the physical body and the differences between these bodies.

Nicholas Harvey (in Newman 2007:178), says that: “all humans are just different from each other, that there is no norm and that the question of abnormality (ought) not (to) arise”.

Newman (2007:178), however, points out that our differences do matter, saying:

The challenge, in terms of hospitality, is to discern when our differences ought to be embraced and when they need to be transformed. My lust for power or money,

⁵⁰ In the preamble to the Constitution of the World Health Organization as adopted by the International Health Conference, New York, 19-22 June, 1946, signed on 22 July 1946 by the representatives of 61 States (Official Records of the World Health Organization, no. 2, p. 100) and entered into force on 7 April 1948, the World Health Organisation defines ‘health’ as follows: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

for example, is not a difference that Christian hospitality ought to embrace; rather, faithful hospitality would seek to challenge and transform this difference, so that together we might dwell more fully in God's own giving and receiving⁵¹.

Referring to Jean Vanier's l'Arche communities, she adds (2007:179) that:

The alternative to 'normality' is not transcending difference or acting as if it did not matter, but living lives of faithfulness around a shared good, namely love of God. We can go further and say that l'Arche embodies in a powerful way that we are not called to be 'normal' but to be holy. But such holiness is never an individual achievement; it is a byproduct of belonging to one another in and through Christ and seeking to extend that belonging to others⁵².

In similar vein, Kristeva (1991:3) makes a case for not avoiding the otherness of the foreigner: "Let us also lighten that otherness by constantly coming back to it – but more and more swiftly. Let us escape its hatred, its burden, fleeing them not through leveling and forgetting, but through the *harmonious* repetition of the differences it implies and spreads" (author's emphasis).

I would take great care to underline that the requirement to actualise both Newman's and Kristeva's thought is embodiment: being in the proximity of the other, being present, within hearing distance, being in touch.

⁵¹ Newman's question here about what needs to be embraced and what transformed, is a pertinent issue in the church's process of discernment on the homosexuality question. And nowhere is the polarity in approaches more visible: one group feels that homosexual orientation is a given (created) reality, that homosexual people should be embraced and that they should be allowed to have relationships with people of their own biological sex with the church's blessing. The other group feels that homosexuality is a deviation (sin), that it cannot be embraced but that the sinner (a homosexual person who remains celibate) may be loved and welcomed. This latter group also (often) believes that an individual's homosexual orientation can be transformed into a heterosexual orientation and hence made 'normal'.

⁵² Seen from this perspective, we could ask in which ways the Christian church's statements on ethical issues enable or inhibit a sense of belonging.

4.6 From ‘doing for’ to ‘being with’

Jean Vanier explains how our beliefs about hospitality are made manifest in our interaction with others. An example, pertaining to generosity: in one context, generosity is seen as a virtue. It can also be that in another – when looking more closely from the perspective of Christian hospitality – generosity can be unmasked as nothing more than the reinforcement of social status and power.

In his own words: “Generosity consists in doing good to others, in giving our time or money, in devoting ourselves to others and their good. Generous people are in a strong position: they have talents, power and wealth; they do good things for others but do not receive from them. They are not vulnerable to love” (1997:35).

Generosity (understood in this way) is a deed, something that is done to others. But generosity lacks the mutuality of communion, lacks the possibility of reciprocity, of exchange⁵³. And the exchange is not necessarily of goods or commodities, but of the Christian ‘currency’, love. Christian hospitality flows from God’s command to love God and our neighbour as ourselves, singled out by Jesus as the greatest command.

Loving others should also not be confused with feeling positive emotions towards others or even being attentive to their needs resulting in the doing of kind deeds. Love is in essence a deeply mutual thing, a place where our deepest self is laid bare. This deepest self includes our vulnerability and weakness. In Newman’s words: “While the larger society would have us hide our vulnerability and weaknesses, those with mental handicaps simply cannot” (2007:181).

⁵³ Andrew Murray congregation runs a soup kitchen weekly on Monday mornings. Most volunteers would be insulted if they are presented with this notion. In their minds, they are doing good. Vanier is not arguing that doing good is in fact doing bad. He is simply suggesting that doing good is not radical Christian hospitality. I would like to add: not radical enough.

At this point, several questions arise, such as: Who is regarded as handicapped? What is the norm in determining a handicap? Who decides what the needs of physically disabled people are? In engaging with people living with physical/ mental disabilities, is there any room for learning and being helped or is the engagement only focused on the efficiency of help provided? Are disabled bodies in greater need of redemption and/or healing than non-disabled bodies?

Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart's thoughts on body theology and Nancy Eiesland's on a liberatory theology of disability may prove helpful to our discussion.

Isherwood and Stuart (1998:11) point out that embodiment is at the heart of Christian Scriptures: "From the moment when Mary agrees to give birth to a special child, bodies become sites of revelation and redemptive action. Jesus's mission is begun with touch, by water and by a dove". And speaking of Jesus: "Here was a man who held people, threw things in anger, cursed things making them wither and cherished people back to life. Here was an incarnate/embodied being" (1998:11).

They emphasise that Christ's embodiment was not conditional or partial, but complete; completely *human*, even to the extent that his resurrected (triumphant!) body was not 'perfect', but one with physical disability/ deformity.

In the words of Eiesland (1994:101): "The resurrected Jesus Christ is presenting impaired hands and feet and side to be touched by frightened friends alters the taboo of physical avoidance of physical disability and calls for followers to recognise their connection and equality at the point of Christ's physical impairment". Christ, the impaired one, became the ultimate healer. He did this by coming close, by *being with* those he sought to heal.

Newman (2007:182) explains how the mentally and physically impaired can be teachers on living without illusions: "By having to live without illusions, those with mental handicaps witness to the fact that God does not call us to be 'perfect', at least not as society defines perfection. Rather, God calls us to lives of faithfulness in communion

with each other”. She adds: “Faithfulness rather than perfection enables us to welcome the weak and the vulnerable even as we accept our own vulnerabilities, acknowledging our limitations as places of deep grace. Such hospitality is far from moral do-goodism” (2007:182)⁵⁴.

4.7 Within hearing distance

I now turn to one of the key reasons why I have chosen to argue that proximity is a key component in exploring an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality.

Letty Russell (2009:54) explains that God’s alternative to humanity’s tower building at Babel, attempting to harness power into one centre, was to give the gift of riotous difference: “God’s response to the tower builders’ pride is, once more, to create the gift of difference”.

She proceeds to read the story of Babel in conjunction with the history of the early church as told at the start of Acts. Russell then points out that the gift of difference brings unity in focus, concentrating mainly on the exclusion of homosexual people by a heterosexual majority in the church environment. This then, becomes an issue of unity in the body of Christ. In her own words: “When reading the Bible in conjunction with Acts 2, we see that unity comes, not through building a tower of domination or uniformity, but through communication” (2009:58-59).

Based on an exposition of Acts 2, she makes the point that while the gift of difference makes it hard to understand (or hear) the other, it is made possible by the Holy Spirit. She writes (2009:60):

⁵⁴ The urban context of Johannesburg in 2015 is one where there is a particular emphasis on bodily/physical perfection. More than ever, ‘aesthetic centres’ are dotted around the suburbs and images of the ‘perfect body’ (female and male) are continuously brought to the attention on a massive scale by the media. These images of the perfect body are nothing but illusions, false perceptions that cripple the human spirit.

God makes unity possible by the gift of the Spirit that enables people of all nations to understand one another, no matter what language is spoken. Acts 2:6 says that ‘each one heard them speaking in the native language of each’. It does not say that people no longer had their own languages and customs but that they could understand one another.

Russell (2009:60) points out that the understanding that is possible through the Spirit in diverse communities precisely achieves the goal initially envisioned by the tower builders: “This is a very different world from the one envisioned by the tower builders at Babel, and in it the unity comes, not by building a tower of domination or uniformity, but through communication”.

It is of course true that without being in proximity to the other, communication is not possible. Thus, before the communication that fosters unity can take place, the other needs to be welcomed by communicating to them that they are welcome.

Pohl (1999:176) explains this as follows: “By reflecting on our own experiences as a guest or stranger, we can identify the components of hospitality that communicate welcome. What made us feel comfortable, valued, safe? What communicated to us that we were inconvenient or in the way? What is it about certain people and places that make us feel renewed and nourished?”

With this, she is pre-supposing that the powerful group (the group initially playing host) shows a degree of self-awareness and remembers what it is like to be the stranger, that they acknowledge their own vulnerability, their own need to be welcomed. Again, the question is whether we are proximate to whomever we deem to be ‘other’. Christian hospitality has the potential to gather people, to bring them in touch by listening and being listened to.

4.8 Problems with proximity: What keeps us apart?

According to Russell (2009:72), oppression is upheld by the incessant essentialising of difference: “The first clue on the way to claiming emancipatory difference is to stop essentialising difference” (author’s emphasis). She explains that “[t]he essentialising of difference makes it possible to use differences as a structural weapon of oppression” (2009:72).

In this sub-section I will argue (in conjunction with Russell) that the presumed, constructed and perceived differences between (different) people are relativised by proximity, by *being with the other*.

But first, Russell (2009:72) again: “Essentialists argue that differences of race, sex, class and sexual orientation are part of created nature and cannot be changed. From this perspective, it becomes possible to justify oppression, poverty, exploitation and imperialism by declaring that the dominating group has been created to, for instance, ‘rule the world’”.

These are important words with reference to church structures (governing bodies, decision-making bodies) that are overtly homogenous and ruled by white, Afrikaans-speaking, heterosexual men.

Hence, these questions: how can the Dutch Reformed Church benefit from being in the proximity of the other? Has the Dutch Reformed Church recognised its own strangeness, or is white (Afrikaans) heteronormativity deemed so normal that no engagement with those who are different is deemed necessary? If white heteronormativity is the norm, how does this align with the gospel? And what about Paul’s interpretation of the one new humanity in Christ (Gal. 3:28)? Are all human beings not created in the image of God? Are we not saved by the same Lord’s grace and baptised into one new Body? Are we not assigned different roles in one body? Are we not more similar than we think?

But back to differences, for a moment: Is it not in being together, in being with those whom we deem ‘different’, by being in the same room, living together, eating and drinking together, that we discover that the differences between us are not as threatening as they seemed to be when we were judging from a distance? Are fences not re-considered when we discover the humanity (and divinity) of the other by being in touch?

When a decision-making body of a denomination gathers to consider a question like: “Should we allow gay people in?”, what role does the sameness, the lack of difference, the homogeneity of those represented play? Is it not very likely to simply reinforce familiarity, sameness and in effect not challenge the essentialisation of difference?

Russell (2009:74) writes as a possible response to some of these questions:

Hospitality is not *the only* answer to difference, but it is one way to respond to this challenge. It points us to the future that God intends, where riotous difference is welcomed! Hospitality will not *make us safe*, but it will lead us to risk joining in the work of mending the creation without requiring those whom we encounter to be like us.

4.9 Hospitable communities as alternative embodiment of ‘church’: Safe places in an urban context

In this section, a narrative hermeneutic will be used to enlighten and discuss the following statement by Russell (2009:69): “Looked at from the perspective of hospitality, the church becomes a community of Christ, bought with a price, where everyone is welcome. It is a community of Christ because Christ’s presence, through the power of the Spirit, constitutes people as a community gathered in Christ’s name”.

Some five years ago, the Andrew Murray Congregation was faced with a particular need directly situated at the intersection of church and Christian hospitality. It had to do with a particular group of young adolescents from the Maria Kloppers Children’s Home,

members by baptism of the congregation who were to a large degree left to their own devices after turning 18⁵⁵.

Being institutionalised for the greater part of their lives, it became evident that some of these young people – lacking the support and safety net provided by the Home – got lost in society and segregated from the church community on leaving the care of the welfare system.

The congregation felt a responsibility towards these young adults, and the one thing we were able to provide was community. At that point, co-operation with Echo Youth Development⁵⁶ (based in Villeria, Pretoria) was initiated.

After hosting a thinktank attended by social workers, pastors, representatives from Echo (including Jaco Strydom) and interested congregation members to discuss the needs, challenges and possible plans, the church contingent was invited by Jaco Strydom to attend one of the weekly suppers held at the Echo Community in Pretoria.

This outing proved to be an interesting experience.

Being hosted by destitute, disconnected, seemingly powerless (to host, at least) young adults was a new experience to most who attended. We were served a simple supper, consisting of hot dogs and Coca-Cola. We (the guests) had a) no choice and b) no control over whether we felt like eating a hot dog and drinking Coke or not.

⁵⁵ The South African Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) states that a vulnerable child is exempt from the care of an institution like a children's home when they turn 18. From this age onwards, the institution ceases to be their legal guardian.

⁵⁶ Echo Youth Development was founded 20 years ago by Rev. Jaco Strydom (a Dutch Reformed pastor) as an organisation that provides community to disconnected young people. It is largely based on the l'Arche concept, where 'normal' people choose to live with 'people in need'.

To my mind, it would have been more ‘normal’ – perhaps comfortable and less intimidating – to be the host, to invite the young people over to our territory and ‘treat’ them to a ‘proper’ meal, something ‘better’ than what they were used to. I could comfortably impose, thinking and deciding what is best for them. I was not used to not being in control and not being the host, especially in what could be seen as social interaction between ‘unequals’. Sharing supper with the members of the Echo community in Pretoria was a life-changing event.

Subsequent to our Pretoria visit, the Echo concept was explored more deeply by our congregation and a proposition started forming, slightly adjusted to suit our Johannesburg context. The core concept would remain the same: young people without community would live with other young people who felt compelled to share their lives with others. This ‘community’ were to be housed on the church premises in what was previously a retreat centre. The centre consisted of 20 rooms, each with a sleeping area, built-in cupboard and washroom.

Initially, the idea of starting a community of young people on the church premises was met with resistance. A few concerned church council members struggled to understand how we could possibly encourage (and welcome) people to live on the premises, a public space, churchgoing people’s territory, while their pastor and his family were living there too! They wanted to know whether it would be fine with me if we basically shared the same living space⁵⁷.

Yet another group thought it improper that we take in complete strangers and anticipated that safety (of church staff and people attending church services and meetings) would be a challenge. Were we prepared to expose ourselves to the uncertainty, the risk?

⁵⁷ It has to be noted that I do not live in the retreat centre with the Echo@work people. My family and I are housed in a stand-alone residence adjacent to the retreat centre, with both buildings being located on the church grounds.

Finally, after much deliberation and discernment and with very little structure in terms of management, the decision was made to ‘welcome strangers into our community’. Echo@work was born, a Christian hospitable community where disconnected young people were to find a home and a supportive family.

Following in the footsteps of the Pretoria Echo communities, Echo@work started to host a monthly supper where anyone from the congregation is invited and welcome to attend. It is normally a simple meal, where there is absolutely no expectation other than to spend time together. Congregation members are still getting used to the idea that they do not need to show up at these suppers with a plan to change the world, but that it is good enough to simply be with the Echo@work people, sharing a simple meal.

It is this kind of hospitality, based on Vanier’s l’Arche, not focused on efficiency and measurable results, that Newman (2007:180) regards as a ministry of presence: “...’wasting time’ in this way is exactly what the hospitality of l’Arche is about. It is not so much focused on efficiency and results as on simply being present to others.”

It would be an error to confuse the Echo initiatives with charitable projects. They are not that. Although officially registered according to legal requirements as a non-profit organisation, Echo and Echo@work seek to be embodiments of Christian hospitable communities in urban contexts. Echo is about being in the proximity of the people previously known as strangers. In the unpredictability and harshness of the urban contexts of Johannesburg and Pretoria,⁵⁸ young people without community are finding safe spaces.

In this chapter, I have argued that Christian hospitality in an urban context is not only embodied by marginal bodies to marginal bodies, but that an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality needs to embrace an embodied notion of proximity. An adequate

⁵⁸ Shortly after the Johannesburg Echo community was started, another formed in Table View, located on the outskirts of Cape Town.

understanding of Christian hospitality in an urban context needs life together, it needs community.

I have also attempted, by means of a narrative hermeneutic, to offer a critique of what society deems to be normal.

The issue here is once again, about being in touch, not only with the norm, the normal body or by hosting the familiar, but by being proximate to the other.

Chapter 5: Embodying vulnerability

Introduction

To embody Christian hospitality is not an easy thing, since the act of welcoming the stranger is inherently risky. It is not very safe, either, especially in the context of Johannesburg, South Africa⁵⁹. Hence, a discussion on Christian hospitality needs to include the aspect of vulnerability. It is indeed an ambiguous, even dangerous, thing to say: “Come.”⁶⁰

Richard Kearney (2010:45) warns: “Not every stranger is divine. There is the other who kills and the other who brings life. The other who loves and the other who lies. The knock on the door may be the Lord (qua host) inviting us to a feast or (qua guest) seeking entry to our home; but it may also be a psychotic murderer, a torturer come to inflict pain on innocents, a rapist bent on violating loved ones”. Hence, I would argue, the vulnerability under discussion is not an abstract one, or merely theoretical, but a vulnerability that is close to home, close to the bone, close to the body.

Nico Koopman (2013:43) offers the following definition of vulnerability: “Vulnerability firstly means that we are at risk and face the threat to suffer. We are predisposed to various forms of suffering. We are frail and fragile and can easily be wronged and hurt.”

⁵⁹ At the time of writing, news is unfolding of terrorist attacks in Beirut, Baghdad, Nairobi and Paris. The media, as well as the plenitude of participants on social media platforms, are trying to make sense of these attacks. Part of this discourse – especially with reference to the Paris attacks – is the question of what the relationship between these attacks and Europe’s welcoming of refugees from Syria is. Hospitality can leave us vulnerable in more ways than meet the eye.

⁶⁰ On this note, Graham Ward (2001:180) writes: “The Body of Christ desiring its consummation opens itself to what is outside the institutional church; offers itself to perform in fields of activity far from chancels and cloisters. In doing this certain risks are taken and certain fears can emerge within those who represent the institution.”

Referring to the work of Tom Reynolds, Koopman continues: “Vulnerability derives from the Latin word *vulnerare*, to injure or harm, and to be open to be wounded, or in my words, to be under the threat of, and be predisposed to being hurt and wounded” (2013:43).

I am writing this thesis from a place marred by violence. South Africa has one of the highest crime rates in the world. Our cities, suburbs, townships, farms and bodies are ravaged by violent crime, often resulting in loss of property, dignity and life. It is also one of the most Christian countries in the world, with 79% of the population associating with the Christian faith⁶¹. This makes for an interesting – if not troubling – backdrop when dissecting the notion of and embodied Christian hospitality.

Apart from the physical danger involved when we dare to welcome the stranger, we also need to reckon with the emotional and more abstract complications. When we allow the other in, we allow uncertainty, unpredictability and strangeness. This has the potential to make us vulnerable. Therefore, this thesis on Christian hospitality in an urban context cannot be complete without exploring the role of vulnerability and its interconnectedness with marginality and proximity.

In this chapter I will argue that this cannot be an abstract discussion, but that it is an embodied one, taking bodies seriously. I will then explore the Christo-theological roots of vulnerability, contesting – like amongst others Newman – that Christian hospitality is cruciform; that it is sparked by the cross, then practiced, enabled and embodied by and through the followers of the crucified and risen Christ. I will briefly refer to John Caputo’s theology of weakness and proceed to consider our vulnerability to love and

⁶¹ According to the 2001 national census, Christians accounted for 79.7% of the population. This includes Zion Christian (11.1%), Pentecostal (Charismatic) (8.2%), Roman Catholic (7.1%), Methodist (6.8%), Dutch Reformed (6.7%), Anglican (3.8%); members of other Christian churches accounted for another 36% of the population. Muslims accounted for 1.5% of the population, Hindus about 1.3%, and Jews 0.2%. 15.1% had no religious affiliation, 2.3% were classified as other and 1.4% were unspecified.

truth made possible by Christian hospitality. This chapter will conclude with a reflection on discernment in community.

5.1 The cruciformity of Christian hospitality

As already mentioned in chapter four, Newman (2007:169) views Christian hospitality from the perspective of the Eucharist: “I am (...) arguing that hospitality depends on the Eucharist, or even more, that the Eucharist *is* the hospitality we receive and extend to others” (author’s emphasis). She makes her argument even more radical when she continues (2007:169):

Christian hospitality is always cruciform. It has the shape of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Taking this seriously can be frightening. Who wants to suffer? Yet I think the deeper question to consider is, are we suffering or willing to suffer for the right things? A cruciform hospitality does not seek after suffering as such but seeks to live out of the death and resurrection of Christ.

The cross is the ultimate sign of vulnerability, or even perhaps the sign of ultimate vulnerability. A crucified body is helpless, exposed, defenceless and fragile. And this is how God chooses to reveal Godself: by being vulnerable.

This vulnerability cannot be grasped intellectually or built into an orthodox theology as a pillar of any kind of certainty. Caputo (2006:46) formulates a strong case for a weak theology based on Paul’s exposition of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 1:27-28⁶²: “When human rule is displaced by the rule of God, foolishness is favoured over the *sophia* and *philosophia* of the present age. Those whom God calls upon are not wise, not powerful, not well-born”⁶³.

⁶² “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong: God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not to reduce to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

⁶³ Caputo’s reference to being well born resonates with Ezekiel’s prophecy in chapter 16 where Israel is compared to an ill-bred baby, born from an Amorite father and a Hittite mother. After her birth, she is left

Caputo (2006:46) points out that St Paul is offering a critique of Greek philosophy's claims to wisdom: "In contrast to Greek philosophy, the divine is not to be found in the highest, in the most brilliant and beautiful realm of being, but in the lowliest and most unsightly."

This drama of an ever-including invitation extended by a lowly and extremely unsightly man on a cross is re-enacted every time God's people gather to celebrate Holy Communion. Newman (2007:172) again: "The eucharistic drama draws us into the divine hospitality so that we ourselves are enabled, by God's grace, to become Christ to each other and the world, a becoming that might well look like crucifixion and resurrection".

But enabled to what? Enabled to welcome, just as God welcomed and is still welcoming the world at the cross. The cross's welcome is a fragile welcome, a humble welcome, a silent, unconditional and therefore potentially disturbing welcome. It is precisely not a welcome that is extended from a position of power or orthodox theological certainty.

On the contrary. John Caputo (2006:42) focuses our attention on the cross's stark contrast to power and makes a case for a weak theology in reaction to orthodox (powerful) theology: "The strong point about weak theology is that it is a theology of the cross". His argument against and critique of a powerful, secure orthodoxy is directive in this discussion of Christian hospitality.

Caputo (2006:42) continues: "In the Christian tradition, the force of the event that calls to us and overtakes us in the name of God arises crucially from the cross, where all the lines of force in Christianity intersect (cross)". The mood of the cross is not one of victory but of humiliation, not one of forceful defence but of vulnerability. Caputo (2006:42) again: "God's mark is upon an executed man, suffering an agonizing death, taunted as a king

out in the open fields at her own mercy, like an unwanted child. When she enters puberty and is at her most vulnerable, God comes to her and ties himself to her with a covenant.

and dressed mockingly in purple, his ‘kingdom’ being, from Rome’s point of view, a joke.”

Caputo’s advocating of a theology of weakness/ weak theology – in itself a vulnerable position to adopt – is in stark contrast with the security and certainty that orthodox theology aims and claims to keep intact. Vulnerability, therefore, is symbolised by the crucifixion of Jesus the Christ.

But what would God’s purpose with the cross be? What is achieved by confronting the world with this humiliating image of extreme vulnerability in brokenness, taking place on the margins of religious life of its time, there on the outskirts of Jerusalem, this cross? Is it not to include the marginalised, to be in close proximity of the vulnerable? Is it not precisely the burning love of God for those who are not welcomed by the constrictions of religion and law and logic and argument and orthodoxy that is embodied by the body of Jesus becoming the Christ? Is it not to remind humanity of the deepest truth about the human condition: that we are more vulnerable than we think?

Caputo takes his suggested weak theology a step further. He pleads that the ‘might’ – that is, the power – of orthodoxy, of the Supreme Being notion of God – be replaced with the ‘might’ of possibility. He states: “To speak of the weakness of God is not to say that God is missing a limb or a faculty; it is simply to say that the name of God is the name of an event, of something unconditional without force, which is a matter of a ‘might’, not might, of a ‘perhaps’ or a ‘maybe’, not a supreme being, where the might and muscle and actuality is to be supplied by mundane agents” (2011:94).

Caputo (2011:96) holds that it is this possibility, the ‘might’ of God, revealed in the vulnerability of the cross, that opens up a whole new post-orthodoxy world: “The name of God is astir in weak messianic forces, like remembering the dead, which does not raise them out of their graves, as also in forgiving the unforgiveable instead of getting even, in loving one’s enemies instead of hating back, or mercifulness instead of punishing, *or hospitality instead of exclusion*, or saying yes in the face of bottomless despair” (my

emphasis). Hence, one of the seemingly weak, but profoundly powerful things enabled by the cross is hospitality: the unconditional welcoming of the stranger.

But can this welcome, embodied by followers of Christ in Johannesburg (and Paris and Stockholm and Washington and Lebanon) remotely be unconditional? In the face of terror, terrorist attacks, and rising tribalism, how can anyone speak of an unconditional welcome?

Richard Kearney (2003:70) addresses this important issue, this question whether absolute hospitality can be extended to the other: “(we) need to differentiate not just legally but ethically between good and evil aliens”. This takes us to the next aspect, that of the relationship between embodying Christ’s openness to welcoming others and protecting ourselves and others against potential danger.

We are beginning to discern.

5.2 From scared to sacred

Russell (2009:85) invites us to “consider the particular problem of safety when offering hospitality, knowing that it is directly tied to our concerns for all manner of safety in the world in which we live and where many suffer and die unnecessarily”. She uses the biblical story of Ruth to illustrate the inherent dangers in situations where hospitality is extended and received.

First, the background to the book of Ruth. Two displaced women – Naomi and Ruth – are left vulnerable after the death of their husbands and their resulting displacement. Their only hope for a fairly safe future is that they are at the mercy of a potentially threatening

cultural practice, the levirate⁶⁴, facilitated by Boaz. Their disconnectedness makes them dependent on another's goodness, leaving them at the mercy of someone they do not know – a stranger.

But are Naomi and Ruth the only vulnerable ones in the drama? Is Boaz not vulnerable too, not sure who these women and their plans are? Or is he made less vulnerable by his status and power? Is it appropriate to consider both the vulnerability of the host as well as that of the guest? Are concerns for safety in order for both 'sides'? Is it not true that to the host, the guest is the stranger, and to the guest, the host is the (strange) other?

Our concerns for our own safety as well as that of others, instil in us a protective apprehension towards the unknown, including the stranger. Our concerns may reach another level and leave us scared, making the desire for safe spaces acute.

Russell (2009:86) makes a link between our innate need for safe spaces and the biblical narratives: "Long before the uprooting of people through war, violence and economic displacement produced the refugee problems of our own time, the Hebrew and Christian traditions acknowledged the need for sanctuary and the protection of the one seeking a refuge or home". She adds: "Ever since Adam and Eve, the first refugees, people have been searching for safe places in which to dwell" (2009:86).

Russell puts the trouble with the Bible and safe spaces on our communal table when she says: "Given Scripture's concern for the safety and well-being of the creation and all its creatures through mandates of hospitality, why is it that Scripture itself can be so dangerous in its message and so contradictory to God's offer of safety and welcome for all?" (2009:88).

⁶⁴ According to Old Testament law, when a woman is widowed, she may be taken as wife by her deceased husband's closest male relative. This would 'secure' her future, since there would then be someone 'forced' by the Torah to care for her.

She continues: “Both its writing and its interpretation happen in a flawed world, in which persons celebrate a faith in God’s presence among them that is incarnated in the biases of their particular culture, language and religious tradition” (2009:8).⁶⁵

In her own search for safe spaces, Russell (2009:89) suggests that the issue of the Bible’s ‘unsafety’ is addressed first. She does this by issuing four cautions when engaging with the Christian Scriptures: 1. Reading with a hermeneutic of suspicion; 2. Recognising and confronting patriarchy; 3. Looking for the contradictions; and 4. Reading with a hermeneutic of commitment.

Russell (2009:87) also embroiders on the meaning of the word ‘sanctuary’, a crucial focal point for the argument of this thesis: “The Latin ‘sanctus’ comes from the Hebrew kaddish, meaning ‘holy’. The right to protection for all persons is derived from God’s holiness and provides the basic theological understanding of hospitality in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures: *Human beings are created by God and are to be holy, and are to be treated as holy or sacred*” (emphasis added) .

This leads me to the movement in our interactions with others: from scared to sacred.

Elie Wiesel (1985:50) reminds us that sanctuaries or safe places need not be limited to buildings, but can also apply to human beings: “Every human being is a dwelling of God – man or woman or child, Christian or Jewish or Buddhist (or Muslim). Any person, by virtue of being a son or daughter of humanity, is a living sanctuary whom nobody has the right to invade”.

Russell (2009:87) builds on Wiesel’s statement, saying: “Every person as a dwelling of God is an important part of the New Testament message as well. In the Gospels Jesus

⁶⁵ With this, Russell indirectly challenges the belief that the Bible is the ‘Eternal, infallible Word of God.’ It is evident why – if the Bible is read and interpreted as the infallible Word of God – those on the margins would feel unsafe.

teaches us what it means to care for our neighbor in the parable of the Good Samaritan and to welcome all persons, particularly those who are most marginal, to our table”.

It is exactly Wiesel’s and Russell’s arguments that leave us with the tension: what are we to do with *our* vulnerability? Should we welcome all people indiscriminately, taking blind risk, exposing ourselves and those in our care to danger, to violence? Is this what the Bible commands? Russell (2009:115) insists: “If we want the church to matter in the twenty-first century, we must become a community that practices God’s Welcome and hospitality in a world of difference and danger”⁶⁶.

In order to do this, to take this step and to embody God’s welcome, we need to be safe places, not only as individuals, but also as church communities. Safety, in this context, means an openness to the other: the willingness to let them come in.

But it is becoming clear that we are dealing with – perhaps – a paradox. Yes, we may indeed get the sense that God is asking of us to welcome unconditionally, but we also need to be careful, discerning with an open heart and mind.

5.3 Vulnerability and discernment

We can now speak about the role of discernment in community, since we have seen the obligation to be hospitable, the invitation to participate in God’s welcoming of others, the possibilities opened up by viewing Christian hospitality as cruciform and the belief that a movement from scared to sacred is possible.

⁶⁶ This may just be the crux of churches’ struggle to come to terms with their ethical stance on same-sex relationships. In a heteronormative world, same-sex orientation is seen as so different that it cannot be welcomed, tolerated and assimilated fully in church communities. Unless the ideological fence of heteronormativity is taken down by the good news of God’s unconditional inclusion, this ‘difference’ will arguably remain a stumbling block.

Extending a welcome and seeking to include those on the margins, those outside the fence, are acts of grace. But while it is easy to talk about God's unconditional acceptance and inclusion, it is hard to embody unconditional acceptance and inclusion in a potentially dangerous world.

Given this context, Pohl (1999:149) is quite practical in her approach: "Offering hospitality in a world distorted by sin, injustice and brokenness will rarely be easy. We need a combination of grace and wisdom". Here, she is alluding to a practical wisdom, a wisdom acquired in community, where two or three or more are together, where people seeking to faithfully embody Christian hospitality can think and pray and decide together who to embrace and when to refrain from embracing.

Pohl contends (1999:149): "Substantial hospitality to strangers involves spiritual and moral intuition, prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit, the accumulated wisdom of a tradition, and a pragmatic assessment of each situation".

Miroslav Volf (1996:29) states that when we welcome the stranger, grace holds a prime position, going before any judgment or wise discernments about others or a potentially dangerous situation: "The will to give ourselves to others and 'welcome' them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgment about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity."

He continues: "The will to embrace precedes any 'truth' about others and any construction of their 'justice'" (1996:29).

Pohl (1999:149) echoes this sentiment: "We will need to differentiate and sometimes even exclude but our first priority must always be one of welcome, embrace, hospitality. When we begin with a strong presumption in favor of welcoming the stranger, we will be better equipped to handle the more ambiguous situations⁶⁷".

⁶⁷ I will contextualise 'the more ambiguous situations' for a moment by referring to a scene which could happen anywhere, but recently happened in Johannesburg. A friend was about to exit a hospital's parking

In the story of Ruth we also notice the community's discernment in operation. Boaz consults his workers – the harvesters at work – in order to discern whether Ruth can be welcomed and what her needs are. We read in Ruth 2:4 (NIV):

Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters: 'The Lord be with you!' 'The Lord bless you!' they called back. Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters: 'Whose young woman is that?' The foreman replied: 'She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said: 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter'.

Boaz's foreman is offering a testimony about Ruth's character and conduct. He is acting on her behalf, attesting to Boaz that she is not dangerous, but vulnerable and in need of respite.

With the help of more eyes and ears and minds, assuring him that she is someone with a real need and a link to the place (through Naomi), Boaz is more susceptible to taking the risk of welcoming Ruth to share his shelter and meals. Ruth is still a stranger, but being in the proximity of a community (Boaz's workforce) the risk is managed.

Part of the process of discernment, is guarding the identity of the group and its place. Pohl (1999:136) again: "Hosts value their 'place' and are willing to share it; strangers desire welcome into places that contain a rich life of meaning and relationships. By welcoming strangers, however, the community's identity is always being challenged and

lot when she was approached by a young lady, getting out of an adjacent car. She knocked on my friend's closed window with a panicked expression on her face. My concerned friend wound down the window, asking what was wrong. The distressed young lady said that her car was about to run out of petrol and that her mobile phone's battery had just died. She asked my friend if she could use her mobile phone to call her mother who would then come to help. My friend handed over her phone, the young girl said she needed to fetch her phone in her car to get the right number. She proceeded to her car, got in and sped off, stealing my good-hearted friend's phone.

revised, if only slightly. While this is often enriching, it can occasionally stretch a place beyond recognition”⁶⁸.

For this reason, a community needs a strong sense of self, of its vocation, identity and purpose. This is essentially also a matter of values, of saying: this is what we stand for, this is how we do things, and we do not do things *that* way.

At this point, I would like to hypothesise that in unstable societies and unsafe (or less stable and less safe) places like Johannesburg, these processes of discernment will take on a completely different guise to similar processes in developed, more stable and safer places like, for example, the Nordic countries. There will – by virtue of the immanence of a variety of threats – be greater issues pertaining to trust, honesty and physical safety when deciding who to welcome.

One way of kerbing these threats, would be to emphasise the importance of discernment-in-community, vis-à-vis the discerning individual. In volatile contexts, when confronted with the stranger knocking at a door, two or more heads and hearts are better than one.

It has to be noted that a discerning community will not be a guaranteed safeguard against danger or violence and the Christian invocation to welcome the stranger remains, regardless the context. Jesus did not say: “Feed the hungry and clothe the poor, but only when your community has made sure that they are not murderers in disguise.”

Hence, it will not be easy.

⁶⁸ In the debate whether to allow same-sex unions in the DRC and ordain gay clergy, this is most likely to be one of the main concerns: Will the welcoming of the other alter the identity of the place? If so, to what degree? Those in favour of the full inclusion of gay members will probably argue that the alteration will be for the better, those against that it will be for the worse. It is ironic that the same patterns of argument were evident when the DRC had to decide about the ordination of women and allowing women in leadership positions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The fact that Christian theology concerns itself with the theme of hospitality is firmly rooted in the biblical narratives. When we read the Bible, we discover that God prizes the embodiment of hospitality. Both in direct exhortations and in a variety of narratives, we find God's emphasis on welcoming the stranger, on providing a safe place, on serving and being served meals.

Another aspect we discover when reading the biblical texts about hospitality is that a God-event unfolds when people dare to embody God's welcome. Because of God's welcome of us, we feel compelled to welcome others; and when we welcome others, God is welcomed. I have chosen to view this possibility – the possibility of being open to God when open to others – from the perspective of the Eucharist.

But hospitality is high on our agenda not only because of the Bible, but also because of our context. Living in Johannesburg, South Africa, means that all those living here are confronted not only with the ideological other, but with the displaced other, the refugee, those on the margins of societies and communities. One can also argue that the other is always an embodied other, that it is not possible to identify the other without referring to an embodied person.

Christian hospitality is about being in touch.

With regard to the enabling of hospitality by God, Newman has helped me to anchor the possible revelation of God in the other in the liturgy and, more specifically, the Eucharist, hosted by the generous, hospitable God. She says: "To name worship as hospitality is to claim that neither of these is only a human venture" (2007:45), alluding to the inseparable link between divine action and human response (or human action and divine response). Humans can be hospitable because God is hospitable. Humans can share because God can share. And when this takes place, God 'happens', to roughly paraphrase Caputo.

From the perspective of systematic theology, Caputo has proved to be an invaluable conversation partner. He has suggested a departure from orthodox theology (or rather, orthodox theologies), arriving at the alternative theology of the event or theology of hospitality. The event – the God-event – in Caputo's mind is made possible by welcoming the stranger, the Stranger who is God. He is advising that we steer clear of naming processes, naming God and hence confining God to a named description and ourselves to a named set of beliefs.

Caputo helps us to understand the role of power in an orthodox theology. The naming of God, the assurance of dogma and the resulting security creates a fence, keeping guard over the certain, the controllable, and also keeping careful watch over the deviant other and making sure that existing power(s) stay in place.

With regard to the context of this thesis and my personal situatedness, the abovementioned dynamics in terms of power are evident in the Dutch Reformed Church, here with specific reference to the issue of same-sex relationships. From my perspective – arguing for a theology of hospitality – the difference of opinion in the so-called 'gay debate' is, amongst other things, the crossing of swords between an orthodox theology and a theology of hospitality.

In this particular debate, the adherents to an orthodox theology have taken the stance of guarding the truth of Scripture, based on the handful of texts condemning same-sex behaviour and same-sex expressions of love. This stance is not based on opinion, but on an orthodox view of Scripture as the infallible Word of God, thus to be taken seriously. Part of this position is that the progression shown in biblical interpretation pertaining to previous issues like the ordination of women or the condoning of apartheid are not taken into account. The unintended consequence of this hermeneutical position is that the church is perceived by many as a guard, keeping watch over the one gate in the impenetrable fence, deciding (and taking time to do so) who to let in, who to let in on certain conditions, and who to keep out.

This group also holds the conviction – overtly so – that the word/ concept/ notion of ‘marriage’ should only be used in the context of a lifelong covenantal relationship between one man and one woman.

The other position, favouring a theology of hospitality, has chosen a more progressive stance, taking into account the movements made by churches and the Dutch Reformed Church in particular in terms of their interpretation of Scripture over time. This group doubts whether the biblical passages condemning same-sex behaviour stand in condemnation of the LGBTIQ community as a whole, and also of members of the DRC who identify with the LGBTIQ community in some way or another. They are campaigning for a roomier home, a more inclusive dwelling where difference is embraced and welcomed and where all people can share in equal measure in church life, activities and community.

They also hold the conviction that the Christian church should be an enabler in terms of the blessing of same-sex unions. The DRC’s ministers should be allowed to officiate at and bless such unions, guiding people into covenantal relationships marked by the biblical principles of mutuality, respect, trust and all the good things intended by God to couples seeking to share their most intimate selves with one another.

My own situatedness is tightly linked to a congregation that has taken a third route, not choosing to take either of the above-mentioned stances, but choosing to be open to the complexities and paradoxes of what it means to be human. This has meant that we probably lean towards the more progressive interpretation of Scripture. But it definitely means that we take human experiences seriously, that we shy away from striving towards orthodoxy and seek to embody God’s welcome in a hostile world and in the process celebrating the God-created differences between people.

With this, I am not denying our shared salvation and shared identity in Christ. We are inter-dependent members of the Body of Christ, enriched by our diversity. Our sameness

lies in the fact that we are equally marginal, equally close to one another and equally vulnerable.

For now, I return to John Caputo.

Following Caputo, I am therefore arguing in favour of a theology of hospitality, ridding ourselves of the kind of named beliefs that can easily lead one to a false sense of security in our own beliefs and foregone conclusions with regard to God's mind, how God reveals Godself and how God will judge: in essence, orthodox theology. What Caputo is in favour of is an openness to the possibility of God – the strange God – being revealed when we welcome the other. He makes this suggestion, issued with a warning: it may be a dangerous undertaking.

This position is largely aligned with Richard Kearney's anatheism, a theological position he is taking in response to theocracy and theodicy. Writing from a post-World War II European perspective, he is proposing that a return to God is possible after God; that faith in God is possible after the death of God. Being rid of the God of theodicy – essentially a cruel God – meaningful encounters become possible and compassionate conversations between people previously labelled the irredeemable other become sites of reconciliation.

One may indeed, at this point, ask the question: if a more hospitable stance is desired and if steps towards inclusion are to be considered, how can this come about? Being an abstract discussion, there can be no definitive answer. But Julia Kristeva's hypothesis – that we are able to welcome the Stranger when we acknowledge that we are strangers too – may be helpful.

Kristeva has pointed us back to the Old and New Testament invocations to remember that 'we' who consider ourselves to be the welcomed, accepted in the circle and therefore 'in power' need to not forget where we come from. Before Israel was God's chosen, became blessed and singled out to a specific purpose, she was a bastard child, metaphorically born of an Amorite father and a Hittite mother (Ez. 16). Therefore, if Israel were to

elevate herself and become a judge of others and their worthiness to be included in God's inner circle, she would distance herself from the covenant of grace God offered her.

I return to the question of how to move towards a theology of hospitality. Following Kristeva, we surmise that a good starting point is being in touch with our own strangeness, admitting that we are not blameless and the normal ones representing the norm, but that we share in the fallenness of the world. We get in touch by daring to look outward, beyond the margins of our own world, by then allowing the stranger in, open to the possibility that something divine may take place in our togetherness, in being together and not necessarily in doing things for our guest. Community becomes a reality when we allow roles to be reversed, when we allow ourselves to be hosted instead of maintaining the role of host, when we submit to being served instead of insisting that we serve.

But this makes us vulnerable. It involves the giving away of power, it involves entertaining uncertainty and being the possible targets of exploitation or violence. This vulnerability is in essence cruciform, it is the same defenceless vulnerability of the cross, of Christ and the body of Christ. Since we share at God's table, are served and endeavour to serve, we are vulnerable as Christ was vulnerable.

In an urban context like that of Johannesburg, we need not look far to find violence and experience vulnerability. This calls for a certain kind of discerning vigilance; a vigilance not marked by fear of the other, but a mindful vigilance embodied by a community, a group of Christ-followers who seek to see the other as sacred, careful to consider the safety of the community and the well-being of all who may be exposed to the stranger.

Also, in the contexts of Johannesburg and of South Africa, we may remember the role of fences. South Africans live with these constant in-your-face visual reminders that security is an issue, that safety a shared concern and that bodies are here more vulnerable to intrusion, assault and murder than many other places on earth.

Does the visual presence of security fences play a role in the collective psyche of South Africans? What place does fear have in our hearts and minds? In terms of South Africa's demographic diversity, what has become of the inspirational optimism that flared shortly after the country's first democratic elections in 1994? Do we still view difference in an appreciative manner, or was the potential optimism prematurely inhibited by fear of the other?

One may also ask whether the position of the white Afrikaans male in South African society plays a role in the leadership structures and decision-making processes of the DRC. Does the white Afrikaans male feel threatened by the tremendous diversity South Africa represents coupled with security concerns? Is he feeling disempowered and emaciated in the post-apartheid South Africa?

If so, does this have an effect on the DRC's theology? Does it contribute to the creation of a laager mentality, aiming to keep watch over the same and keeping a watchful eye on the fence, keeping the stranger and his strangeness out and the familiar safely in? If this is the case, one could ask what the role of a theology of hospitality could possibly be. Is it possible that a theology of hospitality can liberate not only those who are currently (still) seen as second-class citizens, but also the gatekeepers? Is it possible that a theology of hospitality can be instrumental in making new communities manifest, communities of compassion and care and trust, places of hope?

Lastly, one more story.

After a sermon series on community at Andrew Murray Congregation in Johannesburg, a member of the congregation came to one of the evening services, slightly flustered but keen to share a kind of testimony. It was evident that he'd just experienced something challenging and life-changing.

His experience had to do with the two beggars at the corner of Central Street and 11th Avenue, Houghton, Johannesburg, a few blocks from the house where Nelson Mandela

passed away on 5 December 2013. While on his way to church, he was approached by the one homeless man. The church-goer testified that in that moment, this man from the margins confronted him with his power and privilege. Our church-going friend had nothing to offer, except three apples that happened to be ‘left over’ in his gym bag.

He proceeded to offer one of the apples to the homeless man.

Then things got interesting. The homeless man – seeing that he had more than one apple to offer – invited our churchgoing friend to eat an apple with him and his other beggar friend. Right there, on the busy street corner.

So this is what happened: the disjointed ‘host’ parked his car on the side of the road, got out, became vulnerable, introduced himself and learnt that the previously unnamed bodies who frequent the intersection are called Moses and Solly.

The three three of them sat down on the pavement and each had an apple.

This became a holy meal, a divine encounter.

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